

MUSIC CONNECTION



Artist to Artist: Share With Conviction

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August 5, 2021

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The creative person's life is filled with flip sides. For every muse that inspires us, we have to work like a mule to bring the idea to life. For all the moments where our belief in our ideas is unshakable, there are other moments where the monkeys of self-doubt take over inside our heads. It can be exhausting and confusing and can drain the joy from the journey, as artist John Armato writes in the following treasure trove of hard-earned advice:

The Essential Lessons of Beginnings and Endings, Vulnerability and Conviction

I've been a musician longer than I've been anything else, and I've been a writer and designer for nearly as long. My hobbies and my career have creativity at their core and yet it seems like I – and every other musician and creative pro I know – have to relearn the same lessons time and time again.

I just released my first album – *The Drummer Loves Ballads* – and although I've been playing drums for 49 of my 57 years and have had a career as a creative strategist in the corporate world for nearly 35 of them, a few of those lessons roared back into "worth-relearning" focus along the way.

Beginnings are everything.

Ideas need to incubate, it's true. But eventually you have to act on them, or they will die as they began – just an idea. For me, *The Drummer Loves Ballads* began 40 years ago at a [jam session](#) where my suggestion to play a ballad was greeted, shall we say, without enthusiasm. For decades after that I had the idea for and the title of an album floating in my head, but five years ago I enlisted my good friend and fellow drummer, John Cushon, to help produce it. From this comes two reminders to me, and perhaps to all of us:

First, if you're not making it happen on your own, enlist someone to help you. Gathering collaborators can be the first step in making an idea real, and it is also an act of accountability.

Second, the first act of creation can be a tiny act: The idea of my album took root when I played that first jam session. But the act of making the album itself began by simply scheduling our first pre-production meeting. Five years transpired between the first meeting and the release, but I'd still just have an idea – not an album – if it hadn't been for that first meeting.

Endings are just as necessary as beginnings.

Again, two reminders come to mind under this heading.

First, never – ever – give bad people room to thrive in your creative pursuit. With one exception every single person who contributed in some way to the making of *The Drummer Loves Ballads* – and there were approximately 40 of them – was fully committed, fully professional, and fully prepared. The one exception? A singer who adamantly asked for partial compensation in advance (I was a nice guy and agreed; I will not be a nice guy again) and then came into the studio not knowing the lyrics, the tune, or even the form of the song he'd had weeks to prepare. It was a well-known standard and I had provided him a chart, lyric sheet, and *nine* different reference recordings. As soon as we realized what was going on, we fired both the singer and the song. No time spent trying to "make it work" would have been worth it and it would have created a transfusion of bad energy, replacing all the otherwise outstanding energy in the room. There are times to cut your losses -- and swiftly.

Second, it has been said that art is never really finished, only abandoned. It's tempting to tinker indefinitely, add another track, remix the orchestra, pull the flutes out, try a different intro. A little bit of this is, of course, the creative process itself – a natural path of discovery. But too much is a way of not committing and that is the unholy yield of perfectionism. It is a curse I struggle with considerably. But remember (as I have needed to be reminded): No one knows what you didn't produce. Possibilities are, by definition, endless. So you have to simply choose a moment in time. Whatever it is you're working on: It's done when adding *anything* else doesn't add anything at all, and when taking *anything* away makes the whole thing fall apart.

Create with vulnerability ...

If it's your project, then create with a commitment to be true to yourself. Otherwise, truly, what is the point? It's easy to edit emotions, to temper passion or alter expression for whatever reason – to be more commercial, to make others happy, or to avoid feeling out of step. The world doesn't need you to sound like anyone other than you. The question I asked myself most often while working on *The Drummer Loves Ballads* was "Is this the album I wanted to make?" Once you have a vision, you have vulnerability, because if you change it for anyone else, it's no longer your vision. And it is in vulnerability that authenticity and honesty shine through.

... but share with conviction.

Boy, does everybody have an opinion, and you will hear those opinions as soon as you start to share what you've created. I shared early mixes of my album with a small number of people I really love and respect and nearly immediately I needed the spine of my convictions to absorb the feedback. Not because they didn't love it – they did (for the most part!). Not because they were cruel – they weren't. But because they were all over the map and there was no way to reconcile what I was hearing. "Too many notes going on there," would say one. "Not enough movement there," would say another – about the very same solo. "I like that you did that tune in a different style than it's normally done, would say one. "You should have done it like the original," would say another. And so on.

The truth is, these were all musicians whose opinions I respect and whose expertise I value. But there is simply no way to let their feedback matter. It is in those first moments of sharing our work, and later when it is widely released and heard by a bigger audience, that we are reminded of that timeless truth: You can't make everyone happy. So there is really only one reasonable option: Make yourself happy.

By the time the music has left the studio you have to change out of your vulnerability suit into your suit of armor and share your creation with conviction: *This is mine. It's what I wanted to make to fill what has been missing for me in the world. And I hope you like it, but if you don't like it, then that is the world's invitation for you to create something to fill whatever is missing in it for you.* •

JOHN ARMATO is a Kansas City native, New York City ex-pat, and now Sacramento resident who appears on the CDs *Claudette*, by vocalist Claudette Stone and *Comfort* by praise singer Lisa Bloecher. *The Drummer Loves Ballads* is his first release as leader. The album was designed to be a new soundtrack for lazy Sunday afternoons, romantic evenings, and melancholy midnights, but you'll swear it's a long-lost jazz favorite. Armato has had parallel careers as a communications executive and creative strategist as well as a musician. *The Drummer Loves Ballads* combines his talents as a jazz drummer with his skills as a writer, designer, and speaker to create a uniquely personal project.

[The Drummer Loves Ballads](#)