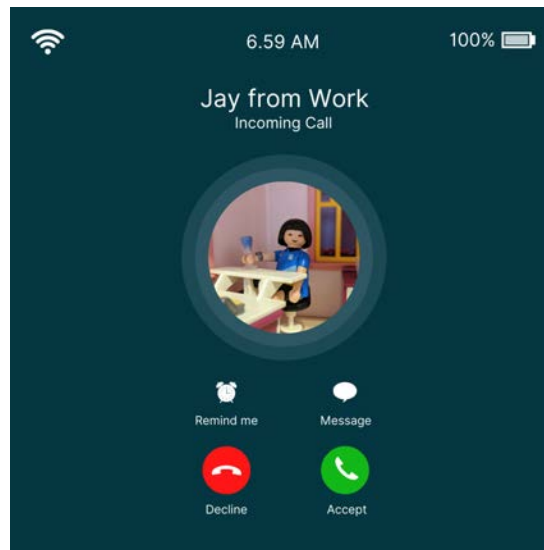


It's the summer of 2020, or maybe some other year, and your job has switched to remote, meaning you get an extra two hours of your day back since you're no longer sitting in traffic. Wow! Lucky you. Your job isn't particularly interesting or creative, and you're pretty new to it as well, and any chance you had to make friends with your co-workers is gone now, since who really wants to sit on another Zoom call after five back-to-back.



It's your lunch break and you're standing in your kitchen waiting for your leftover rice dish from last night to warm up, so you open up Instagram. Swipe through a few stories, scroll past a few posts, maybe go to your explore page and see some cute dog videos and some memes. The algorithm knows you so well. You return to your homepage and wow! Your favorite artist (well, one of them, you're not keeping track) just released a song this morning. You wonder how you missed seeing this, because when you click over to their profile, you see they have been giving announcements for days, weeks even, with some sort of emoji countdown. You take your food out of the microwave and sit down to eat, putting in your headphones and looking up the song on Spotify. It's a good song, so you add it to one of your many playlists.

You used to listen to music, or podcasts sometimes, on your way to work, so now your playlists are usually for walks around the block or washing dishes. But it's nice, and you're happy you found the song. You don't think about it past that.



That evening, you head to the grocery store. You're out of... everything. Except for almond milk... your former roommate bought so much of that before moving out and didn't want to take it with them. Oh well. You walk in and do your best to avoid standing less than six feet away from someone. The shopping carts help create some distance. The grocery store's music though... ugh, you think. You left your headphones back home, or else you'd tune it out with something better. It's that trashy pop stuff. In one ear and out the other, no further thought. This song has mentioned buying a Porsche six times now... is that really in its chorus? You can't imagine how anyone would willingly listen to this, and then remind yourself, gratefully, that you aren't willingly listening to it. In fact, no one in the store is, maybe not even the person who turned it on. It's probably on some 2021 Pop Hits radio, algorithmically selecting

songs to subject the entire grocery store to. As you reach for another box of rice, you think, *I could write a better song than this*. And at first you don't think on it further, but when the next song's screechy vocalist sings about just being themselves (like you would care about that, this person could surely just do whatever they wanted with the amount of money they make), you decide that once you get back home, you're going to write a song.



In high school, you were in a band. Lead vocalist, and not too bad on the guitar. Your uncle had tried to make it in the music business and... it didn't work out for him. Your parents were pretty discouraging. But back then, it must've been harder. He would've had to do some wild advertising efforts to get people to know him. And record, too, probably in some fancy studio. You could create a social media account in moments, probably get famous that quickly too right? Your old roommate was an influencer, and most of the time that just seemed to translate to them getting free stuff and going to pop-up events with like, unicorn slushies and brightly colored walls to stand in front of. You could do that, if you wanted to, but maybe you

don't need to. It looked pretty fake anyways. And as for the recordings, you could rent a microphone from the library... is it even open? No matter. And whatever editing you need to do, you can use some free downloadable app on your laptop.

You sit down at the table and open up a blank notebook to jot down some ideas for your song. You have... none, not yet at least. You wrote a song or two in high school with your friend, but those weren't any good. Actually, musically they weren't too bad, like clearly they were catchy since you still know the song today, but the lyrics didn't really represent you as a person. You wrote a break-up song and like... you'd never even been in a relationship. And it was full of cliches. You know you wouldn't write a song about being rich (you're not rich, for starters), but surely it's better to be yourself. But like... really be yourself. Not be pretending to be yourself. You can tell the difference. The artists you listen to always are being real. One of them has a podcast even, where they give advice and tell their life stories; it's great, and very relatable. You make a note to yourself to listen to the newest episode on your walk tomorrow morning. If you get to be famous, you're going to be yourself; you'd make sure your audience knew that, too. But now you're getting ahead of yourself; you don't even have a song yet, and it doesn't look like you're going to anytime soon.

You stare at the blank page for a bit (opening up Instagram every five minutes to scroll looking for "inspiration") before you give up, and just open up YouTube. Someone you're subscribed to posted some video about the latest YouTube drama. Sweet. You lay back and start watching, kind of paying attention to it, kind of just thinking about your day. An Ad segment starts. "Ever since March, I've been at home a lot and wanting to be creative. So I started

taking online classes to learn graphic design with...". Genius! An online class. And like, every YouTuber has a sponsorship with this company, so if you decide to use this platform you'll get a month or two free, or something. You decide you'll go look for an online class to inspire your music making, once the video ends. The YouTuber announces in the last minute that they're releasing a song. Maybe you'll listen to it.



You Google for a bit to try and find an online course. There are... so many to choose from. Everyone making them seems qualified, famous obviously, even though you've never heard of them. Some are just about songwriting, some are about the business side of things, one mentions something about advice on choosing a lawyer? Maybe you were getting ahead of yourself to think you could make money with this, but like, a couple hundred dollars from a song wouldn't be bad? That sounds reasonable for sure. Some courses seem like a big time commitment, hours per week, for weeks. And then others are just super expensive; \$450 for a four hour course? No thank you. One of them offers a chance to meet collaborators and work on a song with classmates. That sounds really nice, especially since you spend most days just, by yourself. But will everyone be as invested as you are? Unsure. And that's if you can even pick a topic- should you just write a song or actually figure out how the industry works?

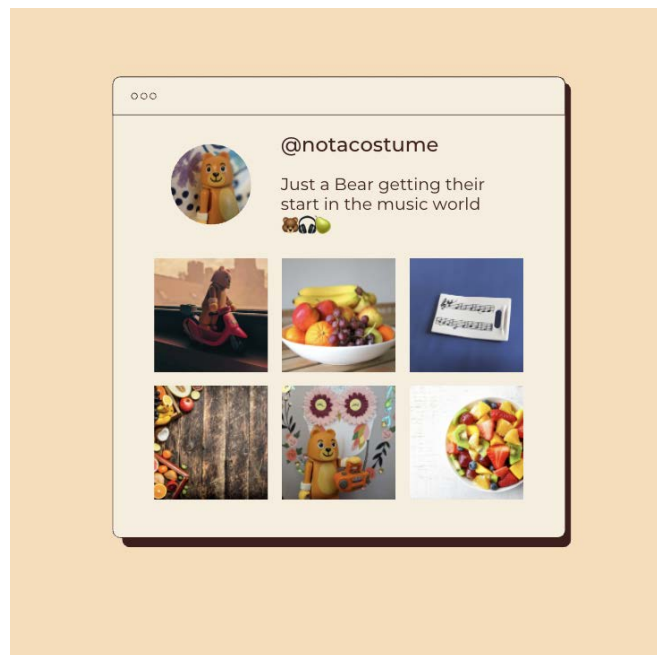
Should you be buying a course just about making music from your laptop, or while working a full-time job? You definitely want to be famous, who wouldn't, so should your course focus on that? Why are you even doing this?



You manage to find a reasonably priced course that will take six weeks and covers just about everything; well, you think everything, you wouldn't actually know. Six weeks of your time isn't bad, and maybe you can do work on weekends if you get behind. You want to do this... to be creative, to tell your story. Maybe make some friends too? You liked being in that band in high school, and so many artists do collabs it seems. It'll be great.

Six weeks pass and you finish the course. You have a song, in fact you have two since one night you couldn't sleep and came up with an awesome melody in the shower. The words were a bit harder, you aren't a poet, but you came up with a chorus and a verse and a short bridge so you're set! You feel ready to record and upload, but you read somewhere that you really want to like, hype up the release on social media. You have an Instagram account, but

it's the same one you've had since middle school with all of the awkward selfies from high school and pictures from parties you later regretted going to. It's a private account, too, and you're not sure you want to change that anyways. You're definitely more of a private person. But you spent time, and money! trying to make these songs, so you'll want them to have a good release. So, you create your artist account with your cool stage name and make a vague post with a picture of a bowl of fruit (a metaphor relevant to your songs) in green lighting you did with a filter and put the date you want to release the song. You look up what hashtags to use and add them to your post, and then mass follow a bunch of artists, most of them smaller like you (you found them through a hashtag)... surely some will follow back? You of course post about it on your personal account and some family and friends follow you and others... don't. It seems kind of random who does and doesn't follow your new account. One person you haven't talked to since US history in 8th grade follows your new account, but the drummer from your band doesn't? Well. Okay then.



It's exciting, honestly, making this new account. It's so different to what you usually post and you usually do. Everything with this is. Your life is usually so normal, but now... you're releasing music and you have a second account for social media, with one post, but still. That makes you think... surely one post isn't enough? Doesn't the algorithm like it when you post a lot? Or does it only like it when you post regularly... or maybe it's that you're supposed to post to your story... No matter. The Internet will surely have some great advice on posting on social media. This is so unlike you though, to be googling social media advice.

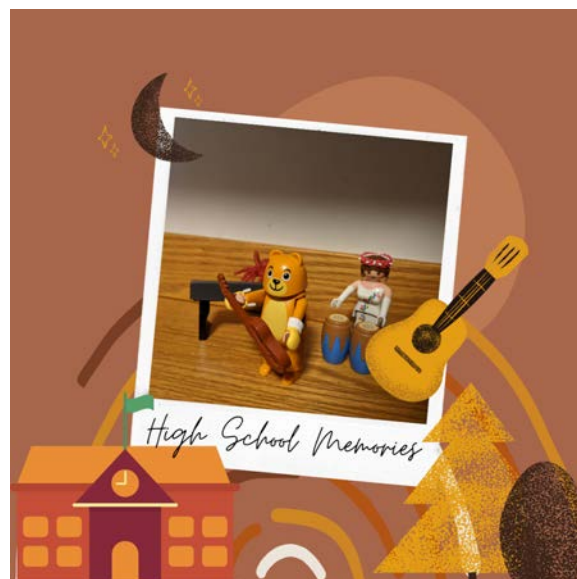
And after a few hours of searching and writing down the notes in your songwriting notebook, you also realize it's a lot of work, well, more work than you expected. You're supposed to create a schedule and plan out posts days in advance. Usually you're not even the one who takes the photos for your personal account, but still the idea of hiring a photographer? Not really something you want to do now. All this so you can release a few songs (since starting this social media adventure, you had come up with an idea for another one)... but it'll be worth it. And so what if posting on social media isn't really like you. It does feel kind of odd, at first, actually. To be putting so much thought into an Instagram account. When you went to the park yesterday to take some pictures to make a post about sustainability (being green is important!) it felt so strange to borrow your neighbor's tripod and pose. People were definitely watching you. But that is what you wanted; you just wish you had a sign like "Follow me @_____", so the publicity worked. Publicity, marketing... it's a lot, and it's so not you. You're not bad at it, either, maybe, you get a decent number of likes on your posts and your follower count is increasing. But sometimes you just want to mindlessly be scrolling through

the explore page looking at cute puppies, rather than thinking carefully about who to like and follow. Well, you can do that on your personal account, but you often forget to even check that one. It'll all be worth it though; sure, the Instagram is a little fake and staged, but whose isn't? Your music will all be very genuine though, all about you and your story. Maybe you'll write a song about that.

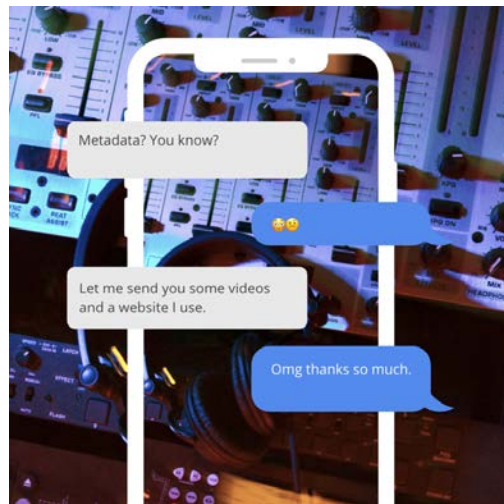


You release the songs! A friend of a friend helped you figure out getting it on all the streaming platforms. And thank goodness too, you didn't want to have to take another course about just that. You think people are listening to it too, awesome! But how do you actually get people who don't already know you to listen? You usually find songs from playlists or the algorithm... but you think those even hardly know you exist. How do you even get on playlists or work with the algorithm? Some songs are probably better for those... like there's maybe an ideal song length or something, or a hit genre. If you had just one song go viral, people could find your other songs, no matter that that's never how you find artists you listen to. Songs about

being rich... right, that's what got you here in the first place! You wanted to create real music, your music. But if making something, well, inauthentic managed to make your other work, your better more true works, popular, it'd be worth it, right? Is that not how social media worked already, lie a bit but at least people will want to know the real you? Create a community, even if it's a bit staged, but then you can bond over your shared life experiences? In-between work and various other obligations, you manage to write a few more songs. It's a nice pastime, and even though you're not really sure why you haven't made money (the business part of the course, you realize, wasn't all that practical and was maybe a bit too focused on the negatives and thinking about the future), you decide to invest a bit in your business, yourself, that is, and get some better equipment. Maybe by the end of the month you'll have enough to release an EP! Your social media presence has stagnated a bit since your first release... what do you post if there's no music? So you vaguely talk about your life and your family, and post a story about your high school band. The drummer finally follows you, and asks if you'd want to write something together, so of course you say yes!



An amount of time has passed, and you have a good number of releases and a pretty good number of streams. You've joked about making some merch to finally make money, but you're really not sure why you haven't made any. You DM an artist friend and they ask about your metadata tracking. You send a confused emoji, and they reply with a YouTube video about it. Great. There were things you were supposed to be doing. Why didn't anyone tell you this? No matter. You're fast at figuring things out. But... maybe after this week, since you're really busy with your actual job, and your parents want to do a giant family zoom call for the holiday. Plus, you have no idea what you want to post for this Thursday, and you're running out of time. It's still all just for fun. Yes.



It isn't too hard to figure out the metadata, and you're excited to finally get money. Awesome! You pretty quickly find out that unless you're in the top of the top of streamers... you won't be making much. Both of your grandparents pay for Spotify just so they can listen to your songs (though you've given them a few other recommendations, as well, some recommendations being your artist friends from Instagram but that's no matter). Maybe you just have your grandparents pay that subscription fee directly to you instead... but that seems kind of weird,

charging your grandparents. If they were strangers it wouldn't be as weird, you think, but if someone mostly listened to your songs, shouldn't you be compensated at least a fraction of the subscription fee for that? Surely?

If this was back in like, medieval or renaissance Europe, you could be hired by some church to write for them. You don't write that kind of music, but still. It doesn't seem like the streaming services care about you as an artist, since you basically get nothing from them while they profit from your poor grandparents (you'll just give them your next releases for free). Luckily you have your actual job that's been growing on you, but you like the music thing a lot too, and maybe in an alternate universe you'd do it full time. Everyone likes music, even if they don't give much money for it. Just another situation of something having value to society but the money not reflecting that. You could write an entire Instagram post about that, or go live and rant. Your artist friends would support you. It would ruin your aesthetic though; you're positive and care-free and love what you're doing, as far as people know from Instagram, regardless of the money. So, it must be time to write another song.

