

Episode 3 - Transcript

[00:00:00] Welcome to the third episode of the second series of *In Ten Years' Time: How to Live a Creative Life*. Thank you so much for being here. I'm Tricia Duffy. I'm a songwriter, a media consultant, a singer and a podcaster. And I'm here with an aim to inspire you to live a creative life. To find a balance of creativity that works for you and to encourage you to make that creative dream a reality.

With a combination of small daily steps and the heady power of ten to help us, we will live a more satisfying life. If you'd like to engage with this conversation, please follow me @intenyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook, or @intenyearstime on Twitter or TikTok. I respond to every direct message, and if there's a topic or question you would like me to research and discuss, I would love to hear about it.

[00:01:00] I've spent the last two years trialling ways to live a more creative life and I'm distilling all I have learned in thousands of hours of research into this podcast series so that you can embark on a similar journey.

This week, I want us to think about overcoming the challenge of imposter syndrome. I feel like most of us have our own sense of what this means to us, but just so we're grounded with the definition we can work from in this episode, The Oxford English Dictionary says that imposter syndrome is 'the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as the result of one's efforts or skills.'

Before we get into this, I want to be clear that imposter syndrome is not recognised as a mental health condition. But it is something that almost everyone experiences to some degree at some point in their lives. Even though it can impact everyone, creatives and artists are particularly susceptible, and it can happen at any stage of our [00:02:00] creative

journey. The way this inner critic shows up to undermine us can take a few different forms, and in this episode I want to tackle them one by one, and offer some tools to diminish the impact imposter syndrome can have on our ability to create, and our ability to believe in our creative self.

This is not the work of a minute, and despite the fact that I've been doing what I do for a while, and I've thought about the topic a lot I still suffer from huge self-doubt. But even going through the process of researching this episode, I can see that the things I have most doubt about have changed over the last couple of years. It's an issue that morphs with you. And that is an inevitable part of your evolution as an artist, as a creative, and as a human. I think there's something about that that can feel quite comforting and it's likely something that applies in other aspects of your life too, whether that be your work or any other roles you play with family, friends, or in your community.

[00:03:00] So let's get stuck in. One form imposter syndrome can take is perfectionism. Ah, our old friend. We touched on this topic during the last series and I think it is particularly damaging for creatives because to be creative requires risk taking and it requires failure too. This experience conflicts with any perfectionist tendencies we might have, and sometimes when these two opposing parts of ourselves clash, it can feel agonising.

I know I suffer from this, and I probably always will. In my first TV job, I was nicknamed Mary Poppins. One of the producers I worked with used to say I was practically perfect in every way, and it was not a compliment. I guess I could be kind of uptight, and I worked unbelievably hard. I triple checked everything. I never allowed myself any slack if I made a mistake, and I would agonise endlessly over the smallest thing, anything that wasn't perfect. [00:04:00] This is not a great mindset for creativity. For a start, it's absolutely exhausting. And

the truth is, no one remembers these minor flaws or incidents in your day job.

And in creativity, your mistakes and imperfections can be the very things that lead you to the greatest breakthroughs. Do you suffer from perfectionist tendencies? What we're talking about here is accepting yourself for who you are. You're not perfect. I'm not perfect. No one is perfect. And we would be far less interesting and creative if we were.

There's a book called *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. It's written by Richard Carlson. It's one of those downstairs loo books, you know the type I mean! I think the most important lesson Richard gives us is in the title. He says there are two rules for living in harmony.

Rule number one is, 'don't sweat the small stuff'. And rule number two is, 'it's all small stuff'. And he's right, [00:05:00] isn't he? These little things that seem to matter today will probably not matter in 10 years' time or even in 10 weeks' time or 10 days to be honest!

Another form of imposter syndrome that is particularly prevalent in creatives is the concept of a natural talent. I think this might be the most damaging concept for artists, writers, dancers, musicians, anything that requires practice to hone a craft. It's a debate as old as time. To what extent is our creativity the result of innate nature shaped by our biology, versus the environment we grew up in and how we live: the nurture.

In 1689, John Locke wrote 'An essay concerning human understanding', arguing that the mind at birth was a blank slate, and that everything we became as humans was gathered by experience. On the other hand, more recent work by the neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky suggests that all [00:06:00] behaviour has biological underpinnings, and that we're predominantly shaped by natural selection. I can't solve the nature vs nurture debate for us here and I don't even want to try to be honest.

But if you're keen to read more, I'll put links to both books in the show notes. Although of course there are many more sources on this heavily debated topic. Bringing it back to imposter syndrome, there is something more fundamental at play here. The idea that we should be naturally gifted at something without any practice, experimentation or learning.

As you probably know by now if you've listened to previous episodes, I am a songwriter. I feel naturally inclined towards songwriting as a creative practice, but I'm 100% clear I was not born with an innate talent for writing songs. It's true that I've been listening to songs since I was in the womb, so there was a lot of influence and source material coming at me from a young age. And yes, when I first started [00:07:00] writing, I did it a bit by instinct, unaware that I was using the learning that I had gathered from listening to thousands of songs in my life and applying it to my own writing. Some turned out pretty good. Some were incredibly weak. By applying myself to the craft of songwriting, I have been able to hone my skills through practice, study and practice.

And now I am better. I'm not a natural talent. I'm a hard-working songwriter who's made it my business to understand what makes songs work, how I can use or reject the tools available to me in my artistic choices. It's true that I have huge interest in songwriting and passion for it, which motivates me to apply myself to that craft and feeds the desire to work hard at it.

People who listen to my songs, who are not songwriters themselves, might believe they're giving me a compliment if they say I am a [00:08:00] natural talent, and certainly I would take it in that spirit. But this can feed insecurity. Because I know the truth: that I've applied myself to understanding my craft with an almost obsessive drive. Am I an imposter because I had to work hard at it? No, I'm not, and neither are you!

This is one of the key values of the *In Ten Years' Time* philosophy. Learn your craft, enjoy every step of the way, and you will live a creative life immediately. And in ten years, if you choose, you can achieve mastery.

Describing my sometimes obsessive drive leads me neatly to the next type of imposter. The overachiever or the superhuman. Oh my, this is a big one, especially for women. I grew up with a mum who is a superwoman. She worked full time at the hardware store we lived above. She looked after us kids.

She volunteered with local [00:09:00] charities. She cooked amazing food, proper domestic goddess. If she hosted a dinner, she had a phrase. If someone complimented her on how effortless things seemed to be, she'd say, "it takes a lot of effort to have everything appear like magic."

My mum is amazing and she's hard to live up to. I wonder how much pressure she feels to be all things to all people. And I have done this, made extravagant meals for friends, worked tirelessly to make my house spotless, taken hours to lay a table that looks perfect. Yes, okay, it was appreciated by the people that came over for dinner for a few minutes, before the knives and forks were moved and the glasses filled. But it really didn't matter. What mattered was the company. They would likely have had just as much fun with a pizza from Iceland and a tin of beer.

What underpins this behaviour is the belief that you're only worthy of success if you're the hardest worker. If you don't work harder and smarter than everyone else, you're a fraud. [00:10:00] Now this is complicated because in creativity, working at your craft is critical if you want to gain commercial success or you want to achieve mastery. I work hard at my songwriting and at this podcast, and I don't intend to stop. But what I've realised is that I don't have to be the hardest working person at everything. I don't have to be superhuman. There is potential

societal judgement here. Perhaps if I put an Iceland pizza in the oven and don't lay a table, I'll be seen as shirking.

There are so many layers to deal with. Not only our own personal narrative and behaviours but those imposed upon us. And this is where our 10-year plan comes in. Because by completing mine, I've been able to explore what is important to me. To work out where I will place my overachiever tendencies. Not on being a domestic goddess, I'll leave that to Nigella Lawson!

Slightly separate from that I need to work a bit harder at learning when to give myself a break in my [00:11:00] creativity. That is still work in progress. The most important thing is awareness, and the fact that I know I have control over these choices, and so do you. If you're trying to be all things to all people, and work harder than everyone else, please understand that is your choice, and you can decide not to compare yourself to others. You can choose a different way. Although it may not always feel that way these thoughts are just that - thoughts - which you control. This is sometimes easier said than done. I really understand that! I want to support and encourage you to try on another thought for size. Use your 10-year plan to help you identify what is most important to you.

It's time to get into the fourth type of imposter syndrome. The extreme independent. The solo creative. Do you feel like an [00:12:00] imposter if you need help? Does it feel like a sign of weakness? This episode was in danger of turning into some sort of self indulgent therapy session. But for me, this is one type of imposter syndrome I'm not too seduced by in comparison with the others.

But perhaps it's one that applies to you. The idea that if you didn't do it all by yourself, then you're not competent or skilled. Songwriting for me is both a solo and a collaborative form of creativity, and co writing is one of the most joyful activities I do. A lot of creative pursuits require

time in solitude, and for many of us that can be a great perk of living a creative life.

I know for myself that almost everyone I know thinks I'm a fully paid-up extrovert, but actually I'm an introvert that hides it well. Spending time at my desk researching this podcast and writing songs on my own feeds my energy levels, which allows me to pull out the jazz hands when [00:13:00] required. I can literally sense my friends rolling their eyes if they're listening to this! The curse of the extrovert introvert. That's a topic for another time though.

Back to this independent artist thing. Collaborating, asking for help, learning from others and working alone. These are the ingredients of a creative life. And all of them are enriching. We talked last series about the importance of sharing your work, about surrounding yourself with like minded individuals. You have preferences, you have skills. You are better at some things than others. If you combine your creativity with others or you allow yourself to learn from someone else, you will create something that's greater than the sum of your parts, and you are no less brilliant and creative as a result.

Furthermore, you might find that you're able to help someone else along the way. Be proud to work with others and don't forget to give your creative collaborators [00:14:00] credit.

There's a final type of imposter syndrome that really applies to me right now, in this moment. The accidental expert, even as I'm speaking these words, my inner critic is sitting on my shoulder whispering in my ear.

"Who are you to be giving advice about imposter syndrome to your listeners? You don't know everything there is to know about nature versus nurture. You're not a psychologist who spent years studying imposter syndrome. You have no right to even be having this conversation."

It's pretty destructive, right? I mentioned in a previous episode that I've named my inner critic Sebastian. I even wrote a song about him.

Naming him has really helped me. When these thoughts come into my head and give me the feeling of being an imposter, I can diagnose it with this language. That's just Sebastian talking. He has other ways to get me too. Very tenacious, Sebastian is. [00:15:00] If I quieten him down on the first line of attack, he often finds another way. In this conversation, I can say to Sebastian, "it's absolutely fine that I'm not an expert in nature vs. nurture. I've done the research. I've offered a balanced view. It's completely appropriate to reference these studies as a means to illustrate a type of impostor syndrome, which I have experienced and is well documented." So, he quiets down for a minute and gives me the impression that he's satisfied with that argument. Yes! Sebastian, go away. I don't care what you think!

Then, when my guard is down, he comes in through the back door. He introduces the idea of what others will think. "A psychologist might listen to this and disagree. Some of the creatives you are talking to might not appreciate these five forms of imposter syndrome."

You see what he's done? What I've done. I've now introduced the risk that somehow I will disappoint, or even worse, harm others by these words. [00:16:00] I'm in danger of not being able to finish this episode if I don't quiet Sebastian down.

I recommended the amazing creativity book, *Big Magic*, by Elizabeth Gilbert in the last series. Let me quote her now. She describes saying to her inner critic, "There's plenty of room in this vehicle for all of us. So make yourself at home, but understand this: creativity and I are the only ones who will be making any decisions along the way. I recognise and respect that you are part of this family. And so I will never exclude you from our activities, but still, your suggestions will never be followed."

You're allowed to have a seat, you're allowed to have a voice, but you're not allowed to have a vote."

All good. I'm smiling. Sebastian strikes again. This time he gets personal: "Are you sure you should be admitting all of this? I don't think the Fairy Godmother of Creativity would have such doubts, and if she did, she certainly wouldn't be bragging about them." [00:17:00]

To be fair, I don't think this has been bragging, but we are conditioned, and this is particularly true for women, not to show our vulnerability. But the truth is, without vulnerability, there's no bravery, and without bravery, there is no creativity and without creativity, what is there?

In Daring Greatly Brené Brown says: "You've designed a product, or written an article, or created a piece of art that you want to share with a group of friends. Sharing something you have created is a vulnerable but essential part of engaged and whole-hearted living. It's the epitome of daring greatly." Links to Brené's and Elizabeth's books are in the show notes. I suspect it won't be the last time I mention them, they are both such excellent resources.

Many articles suggest we stop taking ourselves so seriously to combat imposter syndrome and this appeals to me because I do find it helpful to laugh at myself, and I think [00:18:00] sometimes, particularly in the face of perfectionism, this can be very useful. But beware that it doesn't turn into unnecessary levels of self-deprecation. Your inner critic is very smart. He can take this cure for perfectionism and use it to undermine your expertise.

Before we finish, I just want to touch on how imposter syndrome can impact some people more than others. There is a brilliant article on the Harvard Business Review that talks about how for many years it was believed that only women suffered from imposter syndrome. Over time, thinking has changed and it's agreed that everyone can experience the

sensation. What we can take from this is imposter syndrome is not some kind of personal flaw, but there are also plenty of structural issues that contribute to experiencing imposter syndrome.

In some circumstances, some people who are marginalised in society - whether that be for gender or because they're part of the Global Majority - it can feel like they're experiencing imposter syndrome when [00:19:00] actually what they're experiencing is discrimination. Telling the difference can be subtle, disorientating and difficult. I found this article really supported me to understand this so I would encourage you to give it a read. Link in the show notes, of course.

Okay, it's time for the question, the challenge and the recommendation. The question is this: What would you say to yourself if you came to yourself for advice about imposter syndrome? It might be useful to journal on this or even write yourself a letter. The challenge is to write an accomplishments list. On my website, intenyearchtime.com, you'll find a free template for this exercise with instructions on how to confidently and bravely document how much you've achieved.

I recommend repeating this process every few months or every year. It can be helpful to take the time to see how much you've achieved and how far you've come. You [00:20:00] are a creative person and you have done so much. It's easy to forget and it's easy to talk yourself down when the inner critic gets involved.

Finally, the recommendation. Watch the documentary *The Greatest Night in Pop*. It's available on Netflix. It's a feature length film, all about the writing and recording of the song *We Are the World*. It's an extraordinary story and most usefully for this conversation. It shows the mega stars in their most vulnerable place. Shy, brash, insecure, failing. It's a lesson in humanity.

Thank you for joining me this week. If you've enjoyed the podcast, please tell a friend about it. And don't forget to sign up for my fortnightly newsletter via the website intoneyearstime.com. I send recommendations and creativity tips every fortnight.

I'm working hard to keep this podcast ad free. If you've got some value from the [00:21:00] episodes so far, please consider buying me a coffee. You can do that on my website too. Just click the donate tab. Next time we're going to talk about how creativity can actually enhance your health and your well being.

Until then, I wish you peace and love.