

Hustle & Grace with Hilary Sutton, Episode 12

Ashley Gorley, Songwriter, Publisher, Producer On How to Stay Inspired as a Creative

I am so excited to have songwriter Ashley Gorley on Hustle & Grace today! Ashley has written 37 number one singles, and has had more than 300 songs recorded by artists such as Luke Bryan, Carrie Underwood, Florida Georgia Line, Blake Shelton, Brad Paisley, Jason Aldean and Darius Rucker. He was named the ASCAP Country Songwriter in 2009, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017, Billboard Country Songwriter of the year in 2013, 2016 and 2017, and the NSAI Songwriter of the Year in 2013, 2016 and 2017. He's been nominated for multiple Grammy and CMA and ACM awards, and has earned the CMA Triple Play award 11 times in his career, which recognizes songwriters with three or more number one songs in one year. In 2016, he became the first songwriter to be honored with three CMA Triple Play Awards of the year for earning nine chart-topping songs in a 12 month period. In 2011, Gorley formed Tape Room music, a publishing company with a focus on artist development. Writers for Tape Room Music have already celebrated 12 number one songs and eight top 10 singles by artists such as Florida Georgia Line, Keith Urban, Sam Hunt and Dustin Lynch.

Hilary Sutton: Whoa! Ashley, welcome to Hustle & Grace!

Ashley Gorley: I appreciate it. I should have trimmed that down for you, sorry about that!

HS: Haha, no – it's incredible! Incredible accomplishments – and I have to shout out that you're only 41 and you've still done all this. I want to give you a little bit of context. On Hustle and Grace, our goal is to deconstruct the success of our guests and learn about their approaches to work and also their approaches to balancing work with things in life that are deeply meaningful like family, relationships, personal creativity, solitude, and spirituality. I wanted to start just learning about what a typical day in the life looks like for you, a professional songwriter. So, can you pull back the curtain on what a day in the life looks like for you? Are you playing music every day from nine to five every weekday when people regularly go to work? Do you have a set schedule? What's your day to day like?

AG: My days are probably a little different than a regular professional songwriter because I'm a publisher and producer and I do some A&R development and a lot of different things. Today, my day starts early because I have kids, so we're up at 6 o'clock and I'll try to do some type of workout to get the blood flowing once the kids are at school. I think it's really important to get some type of creativity and get some of that energy going in the morning by expending some of it. So then by 9 or 9:30 my days will start because I usually have some things to do before a session. Where a regular writer in Nashville would start at 10:30 or 11, maybe 11 to 4 is a normal day for them, I would do something different. This morning, I got on a call with my staff because I have a publishing company. There are two creatives there, a GM and a VP of creative. So we're talking about ways to hook up our writers that we have signed to other people and also about new songs that have been turned in and trying to find a home for them. So I did that from 9:30-10:30. Then I met with an artist and talked about some songs they should record on an upcoming session we're doing together, and then we went through and talked about some things they could edit that they wrote at the studio. I talked to them for a little while and then I had a session where I was writing from 12 to 3. I was helping fix a song with one of my writers,

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Zach Crow, and another artist to try to tweak it out and make it better. We change melodies around, trial and error, trying different stuff like that. A lot of my days are no longer “hey, let’s see what we can come up with” and just kind of free flow it – they’re really jam packed and I thrive on the madness, so that’s fine with me to jump from one thing to the other. I’m more comfortable if two or three things are happening at once. So my day is usually broken up into segments like that. Maybe three or four hours on one song, a couple hours on another song, and then a couple hours devoted to catching up on business, and then production and working with my writers and helping them get in the right situations.

HS: Cool! So there was a time when you were really just focused only on songwriting and then you expanded out from there and now you wear a few different hats. Is that right?

AG: Yeah! It’s been a while, and I always wanted to do that. I knew it was a natural progression, but I always knew this was the way it would be at this phase. In the beginning I would say I wrote nonstop, you know what I mean? It was a job but a lot of times I would have two sessions a day, meaning a 10 to 3 and then I would write again from 6 to 7 and then I would spend the night trying to come up with ideas for the next day. Songwriting is nonstop so, unless you have some kind of writer’s block or something, you’re always starting or editing or finishing something. But a typical day will be a co-write. I don’t do any solitary writes – I used to do that just to make sure I still remember how to write a song by myself. I would do one once a month or something. Now I don’t do that – I don’t care and I don’t want to pay attention to whatever I’m doing for that long, so it’ll be two or three people in a room. Sometimes it’s a producer with an instrumental bed of music, like a track playing in the background, and we’re all throwing out ideas, whether it’s a guitar or piano or we’re all sitting around talking about a particular project.

HS: Cool, so that’s actually a perfect segue into my next question. For your process of writing a song, it might be that someone comes in with an idea already. It might be that someone has a piece of music already – is that how it comes together?

AG: Yeah! For the most part, as far as successful days, sometimes if it’s really close friends and nobody has anything, everyone sits around and tries to make something up on the spot. That’s cool, but a lot of times people will say, “this morning I heard someone in line in front of me talking about this” and “what if we wrote about this emotion?” or “this is happening in my life or someone else’s life” or “I saw this movie.” In Nashville in particular, a lot of times it starts with a lyrical hook, which isn’t always the case. If I’m writing pop in LA it’s more about finding the captivating melody and groove first and then worrying about the lyric after the fact. In Nashville it starts with the lyric. If somebody is making a track and they have a little groove going – maybe it’s a bass line and a guitar part and the other two cowriters are going through their phones looking through titles that we all keep on hand, or they’re going through their laptops and just trying to figure out anything that seems like it goes with the music playing. It’s like a party thing and they’re trying to challenge each other. From then on, it’s like writing a little bit more fun term paper – you’re rejecting ideas and editing things and saying that’s not good enough. It’s all about trying to settle on something everybody thinks is great. It’s a very competitive business so it takes a while to get something everybody likes.

HS: Do you keep a notebook or app you use when you randomly think of a lyric in life when you’re not in the studio and you save it for later?

AG: Constantly. I have (let me look at my phone right now) my voice notes. If I were to make a new voice memo right now on my phone – the last one is number 6,038. I never go back and listen to them. They're all scraps of melodies. Those are things where if I had a certain artist tomorrow I might have four or five scraps of me mumbling something in the middle of the night or singing a melody I thought of in the car. There are a few apps where you can connect those to lyrics and have them more presentable – mine are a little more scattered and disorganized, but yeah, it's so much easier now. It used to be on cassettes or hard disk recording audio devices, but now it's kind of all in the phone. At a lot of sessions now, my phone is the only thing I take in. I have the lyrics in the notes and I do a lot of writing on the microphone, like spur of the moment, no filter, just singing whatever makes me feel good lyric and melody wise. Some people have their laptop there to think on it, but I'm a little more obnoxious and ADHD about the situation.

HS: That's awesome. So that begs the question to me, what makes good collaborators for you? Who is a good partner – what traits do they have?

AG: You know, for me it's funny because I get asked that question. For me, the first thing is nice people. Just people who don't have an ego or have a different kind of agenda or something. I don't write songs well with people I can't hang out with or watch a ball game with, so usually there is instant, like on a speed date or during your first year of college when you're trying to find friends, it's like that. That's what happens in the first thirty minutes when you're trying to write or having a session with somebody you don't know. Somebody you're compatible with and you trust their instincts. If you're writing with somebody and you don't think they make good decisions about songs, and if you don't trust the people in the room, you usually hold onto your better ideas and don't let them into that room and it makes for a B+ song at best. Somebody whose instincts you trust, somebody who will contribute or add something, somebody who will challenge you. A lot of times, if I'm writing with somebody who says "yeah I love that!" to everything I say, that's not a write that I would jump back into. I want someone to challenge me and bring something to the table and say "what if we tried this instead?" I've written with so many people it's crazy, but there are pockets of people who bring ideas to the table that I wouldn't think of or that I just know we're going to get something great together when we all have that common standard of how great we think a song needs to be to matter. Those are the people that end up on the calendar.

HS: I think one of the people that I'm the biggest fan of that you've written with is Carrie Underwood. I think her voice is one of the best we have, and I think I read somewhere that when you write with her you don't want her to sing it back to you, you do the singing because it will sound so good if she sings it, right?

AG: Yeah – if you ever hear it, it's her. She's an odd creature of perfection when it comes to that. After we write it she'll sing it in one take, and you would be like what just happened? You get caught up in it. I did that today – I was in a situation with an artist, and even the producer knows this rule. He was like "I sing it", because I am good at phrasing and different things that are songwriter tricks or math like when to come in on a beat and make it a little catchier, so I usually sing what they call the scratch vocal. I'm not a singer and I've never tried to be a singer (I get better when the technology gets better) so if I'm cranked up on autotuned and all that, it's more fun. If it's somebody like Carrie Underwood or Chris Stapleton or any of these singers, if it sounds like a hit with me singing, the rule is it'll be a hit when they sing it. If not, when Carrie sings it back to you, if three lines don't make sense you don't notice because you're like "wow".

So to make these songs tight, I say hang on let me see if I'm playing this stripped down, singing bare bones of it. That's when the combination is great, when you have a hit song and then they make it their own and are great vocalists and that's when it's a winner. Especially with Carrie, if she sings it everyone will think it's great and say "oh, let's just move on" and then we've left out three lines or who knows what else.

HS: Exactly. A fun fact for our listeners – I babysat for Ashley's kids 10 years ago. They were between one and kindergarten and now they're in middle school and high school, it's crazy. I've seen and had a long distance view of you and your family for a while. You've been a busy songwriter for pretty much their whole lives. Now that your kids are a little older, and over the years, what has been the approach of balancing time with your family and the constant demands of generating new music? I was just watching an interview today with Pink and she said something like "You're only as good as your last song". How do you deal with that kind of pressure and the little bit of time that your kids are growing up?

AG: I've learned how to write fast that way. I've got a bit of a reputation for writing quick, and it's probably a combination of being impatient and wanting to make the most of the time, you know what I mean? There are little things I've done when they were babies. It was a slower process then because we were trying out new writers and just trying to figure out how to play an instrument or whatever. As time went on and I got better at it, we would stop taking lunches, and with people I'm writing with now, we're bringing lunch or eating a protein bar which cuts out an hour and a half. That way, instead of stopping at 4:30 and dealing with traffic, we can stop at 3. Anything at all like that to try to save time, like trying to write earlier with writers. I've written some hits during sessions that will start at 8 in the morning because I want to get home for something. Time-wise I try to be creative in how I approach it so I'm not missing anything here, you know? As far as the pressure goes, that's just part of it. I don't think some people approach it that way – they just float or are more artistic. I don't have the talent to do that, to just spit out the magic. I have to grind and put in the time and I try to make the most of it. It's also the art of saying no. As they get older and I have had some success, I get offered to work daily or every weekend and I could be gone but I try not to get too tempted by that.

HS: Yeah, so how do you make that decision of what's worth saying yes to and what's worth saying no to?

AG: If I want to do it or if it's on the schedule. I'm out with a big artist in October, and it's a great time to be on the bus. We'll go out and write with artists on their bus, and it's a really cool and fun scenario. I woke up in the middle of the night the other night and thought oh my gosh, our school has Homecoming! I have a freshman daughter and a sophomore boy. So at 4 the other morning I emailed people and said no, I can't do this day, I have to fly out this day and come back this day, whatever it takes. I want to be there for whoever is asking my daughter to Homecoming. It's just being aware schedule wise and choosing one thing over the other. It's not based on what's going to make me the most money or what's going to make me succeed, but I'm not just going to say "hey, let's hang out!" for three days on a weekend. That's family time unless it's out with people you know are going to work hard. When I go out it's a hard working environment. If I'm working with Thomas Rhett or Kelsea Ballerini or whoever, we'll start writing at 11 in the morning and we'll write up until their meet and greet and then when their show is over we'll start again. It's way more than people think. We write 16 hours a day, and when you're out there you can get a lot done. My wife and I have always had that common trust to

where it's like, I'm not going to take something unless I think it's productive. We don't have many situations where she says "I can't believe you have to go out and do that". She's encouraging that because I don't take advantage of it. Weekends are a big deal for songwriters. For artists, like you mentioned Pink, it's really tough because they're out Wednesday at midnight and back Sunday afternoon, and that's tough when your kids are playing sports and things like that. Thank goodness, I've never tried to be an artist because that's a much different thing, burning up the road. I go on trips and try to keep them as short and sweet as I can and it's worked out so far.

HS: So work/life balance is a lot more possible for a songwriter than an artist, is that what you're saying?

AG: It is, but it's also possible. If I wanted to write tonight at 5pm or midnight I could get a session for sure. It is different than other fields of work in that the temptation is, it's not like playing a show when you get paid for playing a show. It's like "hey, you may be missing out on this". I might get a text tonight where someone says "hey dude, can you write at 6pm on Tuesday" and it'll be a really great combo and I'll want to do it and I'll think about it. If it's something I really want to do I'll take off a day and try to balance all that time, but it is tempting as a writer because I never get tired of writing. I always enjoy it. People who really love it don't get burnt out of it, we just keep wanting more and more, so it is tempting to write 24/7 but you have to make those boundaries.

HS: Yeah, and there's always somebody who's going to want to write with you at all hours of the day.

AG: It's not because I've had hits or I'm successful. My younger writers are really just trying to break in and if they don't have a relationship with kids or anything, then they should go for it. They'll go out for dinner and come back and start writing again. I say go for it, I used to do that too, all through college and then a couple years after that before we were married, but now I have kids.

HS: One thing I find interesting is that it's 2018 and you're not on social media. I don't know a lot of people who aren't on anything. You're not, right?

AG: Me and Hillary Lindsey (we moved to town at the same time, she's amazing and one of the best songwriters in the universe) both joke all the time that we're the two hold outs.

HS: I'm extremely impressed by that. How do you not let the sparkle and success of the entertainment industry get to you? It's a place that is obsessed with accolades and celebrity, but you keep a low profile. If someone were to Google you, there is not that much they could even dig up. So how do you stay grounded and keep your own space in the world?

AG: I don't know if it's because I'm older or what, but I'm uncomfortable with social media in general. I don't get it. Even if you're scanning through looking at other people's stuff in front of me, it still feels like you're spying on their life. One of my publishers said a few years ago, "hey, you have to get a Twitter and Instagram, it'll help contribute to your success, it has worked for a lot of people" and I said "no, I'm not going to do that". I didn't feel good about doing it and we had a lot of success in those years after not doing it. It's definitely been proven that it is not

necessary. A lot of writers wanted to be artists and liked the spotlight and then realized that writing was more of their calling – I was never on that path. I'm a rare case where I was never in a band, I didn't want to be on stage ever, I get super nervous. When we get finished with this interview I will never listen to it, ever. No offense to you or anything. I've never listened back to any podcast, interview or performance just because of insecurity or because I don't want to dwell on my flaws of what I'm doing or what I look like or anything. Anything that welcomes criticism, I'm not a big fan of. This isn't bad to do, but I'm uncomfortable saying "hey everybody, check out my new song on so and so, it came out on Friday!" Now, my company has their own Instagram (taperoommusic), I don't even know how to get on it. A guy from our company manages it because we want to brag on our other writers and that makes sense and it's a good thing to do. But I don't get it – first of all I don't have time and I don't know how people have it to know what is going on in everyone else's life. I'm old school like that, it just makes me uncomfortable and I don't know which one of my issues that's a result of, but I just don't like that entire process or the aspect of it. It's a tough thing and it's hard not to fall into the "okay now I'm writing a song to impress these people at this place or location or I'm taking a picture at this angle". I want to always be doing stuff for the right reasons, for the family, because I love it and it not turn into a thing that makes me more of an artist.

HS: That's really interesting. Really, if you were to get into social media, it would be a mega distraction from your work, your focus and your family.

AG: I don't even know – it's so strange, I don't know how it's not for a lot of people. There are a lot of people who work well in the environment where something funny happens on the bus and you post it and it's great, you bring people into these sessions we're doing and it helps people build fans. It's great for artists, and even for other writers, they can write how they achieved a dream, and I know that stuff is inspirational but I can't imagine typing those things myself, you know? I also know a lot of people who say "I liked this person until I started following them on Instagram". There is such an open interpretation of the things you post and the attitude you post with. It's like texting, you can't tell tone, it's so confusing and I'm like man, if there's one thing I don't need it's something to draw attention to myself anymore at all.

HS: Yeah! So you're in a world where you are surrounded by artists all the time and people who have a million fans all the time. How do you stay grounded in that and not get caught up in the success of it all?

AG: Being on the inside of it all is different. If I know an artist and am friends with them working on their album, I see our relationship as we're friends. That's amazing and that's cool that they have a lot of people who want their autograph and stuff, but all of that is just strange to me. When I'm working with an artist, I don't have a temptation to post a picture with this artist and say "hey I'm working with this artist!" I'm more of looking out for the artist and trying to service the client. What they want from me is for me to help them work on new songs that would grow their career, right? So I really do look at it like that. It's probably because I came from a hard working town and family, and I just say "hey, I am here to make you sound like this" and I want to go out there and be in the pit and listen to them, but I don't necessarily want anyone knowing I helped them write these songs. My satisfaction comes from me helping them achieve the next thing and me being a part of their music and their career and the process of writing, which I love, and me saying "hey, I helped them say something they wanted to say". There's nothing wrong with my artist friends who are addicted to attention and love it. That's not some bad thing and I'm taking a high road, I'm just super uncomfortable with interviews or videos. It's just not

what I want and it doesn't fulfill me at all. It makes me shy away and clam up. I'm most open behind closed doors with a couple trusted friends when we're writing and I'm throwing out everything I can think of – there's no filter then. You're just talking and trying to dig and get to the best idea, you're not afraid to say stupid stuff or sound terrible, and once the cameras turn on, that shrinks the ability for me to be free and be creative.

HS: Then you have to stop winning all these awards so that you don't have to keep getting up in front of people!

AG: I like to have won the award or be recognized. I'm a guy and accomplishments or completing tasks drive me as goals. It's cool to win stuff and be honored and to think that anybody cares about any of these songs is amazing, but I could definitely do without any speech. I don't mind if you talk about me, I will blush a little bit, but when it comes time to talking about it, it borderline ruins everything around it because I'm freaked out by having to do that. I act like I'm not but it's like oh my gosh! I get more nervous the more I think about it or practice, so 90 percent of the time I just wing it, which is not a good thing. I end up forgetting somebody and if I dwell on it even more I freak out. So I have a little bit of that. If I go into a room full of people and it's a "number one" party, I have to take a few deep breaths before I can go in there and be on for all those people. It's fun, but I don't know what it is – maybe a little quirk where I think "this isn't going to be as cool as you guys think it is". I'm definitely more comfortable writing with the artist on the bus or in the studio. Hanging with them is fun, going to the ACMs in Vegas where there are artists around and we're all hanging out – that's cool. It's cool when people are huge fans of them and to think I have any part of that with these songs is a cool feeling. I just don't have the star part in my blood at all.

HS: You're obviously an introvert, right?

AG: I'm just an introvert when it comes to public things like social media and recordings, but I'll talk to a stranger on a plane all the way to wherever. I love meeting new people and being in first time writes and being in different situations with new people and working on the music I haven't worked on before. I used to be shy as a kid, and I definitely wasn't in high school and college. Now in the business as I'm in front of people or explaining to a class of people or coaching a team or giving a talk in front of 10,000 people, I don't even care. It really just comes down to a one on one thing and trying to be eloquent and trying to be in any kind of spotlight. And I think there is definitely a whole class of writers like that, who love the creating but don't love the performing or anything like that.

HS: Do you have any kind of practice or habits that you do to shake things up in your creativity and balance the time you spend in your creative work writing songs?

AG: The way my mind works is I need having a distraction to non-creative things, like coaching a kids' basketball team. I taught college classes for a little while and those things help me balance the hustle of songwriting and constantly reminding myself that that's not the number one thing in my life. That's the reminder, just saying this is cool and fun and the means to an end, and I love it, but my world doesn't depend on this or the success of this. I know that balance is tough and I struggle with that sometimes too with not getting caught up in it because I love working and I could 24/7, but taking time when it's needed and learning to work fast has been a big part of it.

HS: I had a conversation with an author/professor who thrives on going for a run because doing something different and physical brings balance to her life. Is that kind of what you mean?

AG: Yeah! The way I rest isn't by "resting" or chilling, it's not like sitting on the beach (kind of like back when you helped us with the kids on the beach). I'll be up playing football, I'm like a big kid and I don't want to relax that way. The way I relax is like tonight we're playing basketball, and that's competitive and fun and has nothing to do with music. Maybe playing cards or watching a sport – the balance for those things is key to not burning out. Even in the music industry, if I'm trying to burn out a little bit on Nashville/country songwriting, I go to LA or New York or I go work on a Broadway play or write hip-hop stuff, or it could be the DJ thing. Maybe it's focusing on the business and being in a couple days of meetings. Sometimes I go to LA and work on completely removed from Nashville type music like EDM stuff or R&B, writing hooks for hip-hop. I don't have a lot of huge hits in those genres, but there is something about writing with new people and being in a new culture of writing. I try to do that once a month or two. Even if it's one or two days and there's no money made from it, it kind of resets my mind and I think oh this is a new approach to writing or a different way to get a melody. It's important to keep listening to music you love, keep your love of music fresh where it doesn't become just a job, those are some things I do to try to keep that fire burning.

HS: That's so fascinating. There are people out there who would dream of a career like yours – they don't care about being an artist or having an album, they just want to be a successful songwriter and maybe get to expand into having their own publishing company. Maybe it's someone like you were 15 years ago, what advice would you give to someone?

AG: I talked with someone like that yesterday. It was an artist/writer, and it always looks fun to do what we're doing, which is expanding and publishing. But I also tell them, if it's a cash grab or it's like, "I see that you're signing writers and it's successful and I want to do that on the side" or something for supplemental income, it's like "dude, do not do that". Publishing fails 90 percent of the time, and you're signing writers in hopes that they beat all the odds and have success, so don't do that on the side. Do that if that's something that's really burning in your being. Same with being a songwriter, the odds are not great. So to do any of it as a hobby or a side-gig is impossible. When people say "hey I want to do what you do, I want to write and publish" I usually get into a conversation with them about what they want to do and if there are ten different things and writing is one of them, I'll be like do one of the other things, it's an easier path to success. But if they know they're devoted to being a songwriter and it's all they can think about and they're consumed by it then I can help them get there. I usually steer people away from publishing companies unless they have the mind like a couple of us have. Shane McAnally is a really successful publishing company, Luke Laird and his wife have a great one in Nashville. There are some creatives that have thrived at having a publishing company but it's a whole different thing, you know? A lot of hit writers are like "I want to write a song and fish and go home". That's the way the majority of them think it should be. I'll juggle back and forth between the two sides of my brain where I'm working on a contract for part of the day or helping someone select songs or talking to a label and then I'm back in the room and switching back into creative songwriter mode. That's fun for me but it can be torture for other people, so I don't usually advise people do all the things I do, I just love all of it. I love having a hand in all of it, but that's not recommended for most.

HS: So is your work now 50/50 business and creative? Or is it more business?

AG: No, it could end up being more business in a few years, but it's still a 70/30 creative, and even the things I'm doing in business are still creative so it's creative for me, and that's what people don't understand sometimes. It's creative for me to figure out a way to do a deal with an artist or figure out a way to keep all parties satisfied, even though it's not writing a melody or lyric, it's still a creative thing. Everything I do, even if it's like interacting with an employee or figuring out how to motivate them in a decision on cash flow, whatever it is, I'm still feeling like I'm using my creativity to figure out solutions for that even in the most business way. Even if I'm doing a publishing contract or a catalog sale, I just get to be creative in a different way about it.

HS: Yeah! And you mentioned that if someone can see themselves doing other things they probably should do that, because you don't want to be a songwriter on the side.

AG: Yeah, and you don't want to be a songwriter if your plan a doesn't work out, because a lot of times it's like I want to do my own stuff but it would be cool if a country artist did this. You're up against 5000 people who day in and day out, 20 hours a day, are just doing that. It's not to scare them, it's just to let them know that there is no JV league, there are no warmups here – you're up against the best. If you love producing hip-hop only and you're in Nashville, that doesn't mean you should do country music. You have to use whatever talents God has given you. I talked to somebody a few nights ago that really likes acting, playing guitar, directing and songwriting, and that's all good, but you have to figure out what your first love is and chase that, in my opinion. I used to make tracks and produce and I still do a little bit of DJing for the fun of it. I used to do different kinds of music and play keyboards (which I still do) and I realized after being in Nashville just for a year that Nashville songwriting and publishing was the thing. So I don't spend a lot of time playing guitar and I can't read music and I can't sing very well or engineer a session very well. I can't really turn all the knobs for those kinds of things because I don't get the science of it and I narrowed it down from 100 to the one percent of stuff I think I'm good at. I threw away and sold some of my equipment as far as producing and making tracks because I thought there were people who were better at it and I thought that I was more gifted with melody, concept, lyric, so I just figured that out as soon as I could. I advise people to do that. Not that they can't do a million things (I'm doing a million things now). It's important early on to think "what am I best at?" and "what brings me the most joy?" and "what am I called to do?" and try to narrow the aim down.

HS: Having that self-awareness has been really helpful for you. What about for other people? What is your advice for people who think they like a lot of different things and don't know how what they're best at – any tips for figuring that out?

AG: Yeah! I mean, pray about it first of all and see what you're called to do. If you do a lot of different things, don't just do it because you're good at something. If I could play really good studio piano, and maybe I could have gotten good enough to play recording sessions, but playing other people's songs wouldn't have brought me as much joy. Even though it's tough to figure out how to write my own, that's what brought me joy. You could act in tv, but if Broadway is the thing that you know brings you the most joy, you have to chase that and be honest about it. Say "hey, this is me, singing songs and writing and playing guitar", and give that to someone you trust outside of your parents or people that are going to say it's great. Give it to someone who will say "hey man, you need to hire a guitar player and singer, but the lyrics are great". And then people you trust can say "this person has evolved into more of a lyricist", but that's any

kind of job, if you're honest and you surround yourself with honest people. A lot of the most successful artists in town surround themselves with "no" people, people who aren't afraid to say "I don't think people are going to care about this song" or "this song is not one I would do right now", something other than just "yes" people around them all the time.

I also have to remember that some people are undecided majors, so they weren't at 13 knowing that they wanted to do something in the music business. I have to balance that with what I expect out of my kids, because I had a passion early on and if they don't I'm like what's wrong with you guys? And I remember that they're not like me. So if my older son is like "no I don't want to do anything with music at all", I have to deal with that and help them figure out their passions. And if they figure that out at 20 or 15 and if it's something completely unrelated I have to be open to that. I struggle with that because I think everyone should know what they want to do by the time they're 12. But that's not true.

HS: Yeah, I feel like that's more rare probably to have that focus and vision.

AG: Yeah, definitely.

HS: Well it's such amazing advice – thank you so much Ashley, this was great!