

Stepping Off the Path: an interview with Molly Sonsteng

Season 2, Episode 1

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

Stephen: Hello, and welcome to another episode of Create. Inspire. Lead. I'm Stephen Biegner. I'm so excited about today's show. We've had a few episodes now where students have come up with the questions and conducted the interview, but I've always been the one to narrate and piece together the story. And the original idea for this podcast was to have students be deeply involved – to tell the stories and raise the issues that they were interested in. Well, today marks the first episode which was put together by a student – almost entirely. That student is Pallas Catanella – and she researched the guest, came up with the questions, went through the raw transcript, and actually cut it together in a way that highlighted all of the things she found important. And you'll hear me once or twice throughout the episode, but the main event? It's all Pallas. I'm so happy to introduce her, and I'll let her take it from here.

Pallas: Hello, I'm Pallas Catenella, a Ph.D. candidate in musicology here at Eastman, and leader of "Working PhDs," a group that's currently working to design resources for graduate students in the humanities who want to explore or pursue non-traditional career paths. I actually don't love that word—"non-traditional"—because it's so misleading. It implies the existence of a feasible "tradition," makes it seem like this is a group for students who are wanting to break away from the pack and do something different, when in reality, non-traditionality is in itself the norm—career paths are usually not linear, they're meandering and have weird prongs, and sometimes it feels like you're walking in circles. For musicians or academics, this can be a hard thing to wrap our heads around, because music and academia are thought of as linear. You work a good chunk of your lives towards one goal—to be a musician, or to be a professor—and this starts in school (conservatory or grad school), where you have mentors and advisors, studio classes and seminars, rehearsals and symposia, which are all designed to give you practice in the exact things you're supposedly going to do once you leave school and enter the professional world.

But, you know, it's becoming increasingly harder to find employment on these linear paths—something that has been catalyzed by the pandemic. Graduate students in the humanities more broadly are having to think about stepping off this linear path that so many of us have been on for so long. The path is paved; it seems easier to walk on. It's lit; you know what's coming in your future, you know what to expect. Having to step off this path and gaze out into the shadowy unknown that is the rest of job market—that's daunting.

But one of the ways to make it less daunting is to realize that this is normal—many people have to (and do) figure things out on their own. And stepping off this linear path means you might be more likely to find ways to spend your life that are perhaps more fulfilling, more interesting that you could ever have predicted.

And our guest for this episode is a fantastic example of this.

Molly: Hello. My name is Molly Sonsteng and I'm just honored to be here. Thanks so much for inviting me.

2Pallas: Molly started as a singer—she received an undergraduate degree in vocal performance at the University of Minnesota.

Molly: I was OK for where I was. I was getting roles. And it's, you know, it felt like I was on some sort of journey that felt like, OK, I want to do this. I always wanted to be a singer. And I realized towards the end of my degree that putting academics, Combining academics with my passion was really challenging. It sort of ruined the whole thing for me, And it took away the magic when I was getting graded for the song that I care about.

3Pallas: So when Molly finished her undergraduate degree, she decided to try something new. She wanted to stay somehow connected to the music industry, but wanted to approach it differently, wanted to reclaim some of this magic of music.

Molly: And so as soon as I finished my undergraduate degree, I thought, how can I stay in the music industry, but kind of take the performance out?

4Pallas: Molly had just moved to New York City, and she ended up finding work at a place most musicians dream of ending up.

Molly: I started working at Carnegie Hall, which was such an exciting place to start. My first real job, I was working in the Education Department, so I was designing curriculum and putting out concerts for families. And it was such an excellent education to not only learn about New York, first of all and the concert hall, but how a nonprofit really worked and the arts in New York. It was just the biggest education I could have gotten.

5Pallas: Molly continued to explore the administrative side of music. She transitioned from her position at Carnegie Hall to a new job at the Manhattan School of Music as an admissions counselor.

Molly: I really learned a lot about how a conservatory is modeled. And it was another great education into another world of music that I wasn't really that familiar with. I went to a university where it wasn't a conservatory. So I really learned how a conservatory operates.

6Pallas: After just a few years there, she was promoted to Director of Admissions. And it was around this time that she also decided to pursue a master's degree in education leadership at Columbia's Teachers College.

Molly: And the goal at that point was to use that degree to continue working in an arts higher education and encourage young people and institutions to bake in entrepreneurial education in their in their coursework. And I did my thesis on what our schools actually doing and our students leaving their they're finishing their degree, really feeling like they had the skills to be more than just I am a musician. And so that's what I was super excited about. And I still am and passionate about that.

7Pallas: And for a while, it seemed like she'd found her thing. It seemed like this slight adjustment of path had gotten her to where she was supposed to go. But—as we know—careers are not linear, and they're full of moments that will take you by surprise.

Molly: And I was working this job for a number of years, growing in my career. And I realized I couldn't really distinguish one day from the next or week or month. And I just sort of woke up and thought, oh, what am I doing? Is this the best way that I can add value to the world?

8Pallas: So Molly took a drastic step.

Molly: I just quit. I quit without knowing what I was going to do. I quit without knowing what you know, how I was going to what my next step was.

9Pallas: Molly doesn't recommend this, of course, but it was exactly what she needed to do in that moment. She was fortunate enough to be in a place to have some time to start figuring out what she really wanted to do.

Molly: So at that point, I was really just saying yes to all sorts of things. What what did I care about what was and what really turned me on or helped Spark spark my eyes a little bit.

10Pallas: While she was looking for that spark, Molly heard about a summer camp for adults. It was designed to help reclaim the whimsy in life and focus on truly being "yourself." This sounded right up her alley. One of the ways the camp helped attendees discover their true selves was by removing a lot of the traditional ways that people often define themselves.

Molly: There was no no devices of any kind. No. no drugs or alcohol. You couldn't call each other by your first names. Everybody had a nickname and you couldn't talk about work. And when you removed these these boundaries and added other kinds of parameters, itw as incredible how how everybody showed up in this way. That was like everybody's an equal playing field. And, you know, the CEO of this company with a dog walker, with a teacher and a, you know, a banker. We didn't know it was just everybody there with with different names and it didn't matter. And it was that moment where I was like, oh, this is this is something. There's something in here. How can I bring a little bit of this experience back into my life in New York?

11Pallas: That's when Molly started to wonder how she could bring elements of this experience back to her everyday life in New York. So she just started trying all sorts of things.

Molly: If I had an idea, I would just put it out into the world. I wasn't trying to make a business out of all these different projects that have now become bigger. IT was more like, I've got an idea. I'm just gonna just gonna try and. And I really again. I got another great education by just trying, And I think that was how I got my sort of the entrepreneurial bug.

12Pallas: Eventually Molly's ideas became tangible ventures and outlets for her creativity. She started a variety show for first time performers, a tiny s'mores company that would mail out cannisters with everything you need to make bite-sized s'mores. She also created a series of secret games that took place in open, public spaces.

Molly: Taking up taking big teams and playing capture the flag in Grand Central with like a team full of, you know, investment bankers to wild's it to to think about it.

13Pallas: Molly said yes to opportunities that seemed exciting to her, that sparked that joy, and found herself working on all of these discrete projects with a general theme of finding joy, finding the play, and doing activities with intention. Molly and her husband eventually placed all of these products and experiences they were curating under a company called Madcap Factory, a company meant to design (as they put it) "amusingly eccentric" experiences to build and engage a sense of community.

Molly: We just figured out how to do it. We figured out how do we how we had to be our own CEOs. I guess, you know, we had to to really learn how to be our own and how to be small business owners

14Pallas: Her company, Molly explains, was built piece by piece, pursuing these different opportunities that interested her, until they came together under this umbrella of whimsy and eccentricity to create something that she never would have expected to create when she first set out on her career path as an

undergraduate. Nobody taught her how to do these things, she had to figure everything out, figure out how to start a company, what paperwork to fill out, the taxes you have to pay. This wasn't in her musical training, nothing she learned in undergraduate or graduate school. Which isn't to say that Molly fully left education behind:

Molly: We were realizing that, you know, what are we doing? That other people could learn from. How are we? So how is our output so great that we could teach some of these skills to other people.

15Pallas: So Molly and a couple of friends decided to try something.

Molly: We essentially did this experiment and we gathered all of our friends into a coworking space for an eight-hour day on a Sunday. And we took away their phones and we said pick one project to work on just one. You're just going to do one thing for this whole day we'll provide all the food and beverage, you know, to think about anything else, just show up.

16Pallas: People came, hunkered down, and Molly and the others were amazed by the quality and quantity of work that everyone was producing.

Molly: When you remove distractions and you're in the space of other people was profound.

17Pallas: And so, Cave Day was formed, designed around intentional deep work, where participants pay a fee, show up, have their food and beverage supplied, and phones taken away—just like in the experiment. The facilitator of the session offers a quote or thought that sets the tone of the three-hour period together, and participants each vocalize a tangible goal.

Molly: They sort of claim and state out loud what they're working on. What is their intention for this three-hour period? And it's not just like, oh, I'm going to I'm going to research. OK Let's dig into that. What does that mean? What are you researching? What do you what does finished look like? How far are you hoping to get? Or if you're writing how many pages are you actually trying to get to? Always knowing what finished looks like.

18Pallas: Facilitators alternate between sprints and breaks, periods between 45-50 minutes of work, and then short breaks. The key, Molly explains, is to do everything with intention. To play with intention, and to work with intention. Cave day original began as an in-person project, in coworking spaces. But now, thanks to the pandemic, it has actually expanded into a global community. Cave Days are held online, in Zoom rooms. And, as Molly and I were talking, one question kept popping up for me, over and over.

Pallas (on first tape) So we're recording this interview and zoom in the middle of hopefully only a yearlong global pandemic. And I imagine, like, I'm not the only one who's kind of struggling to think of this time in isolation and working from home, being zoomed out as time that can be spent like a meaningfully like meaningful play, like building meaningful communities, like exploration. I was reading the manifesto was like, I miss all of these things. I wish I could do these things, but right now it seems like like it's not possible. But I imagine that that part of madcap is kind of like reframing that since, like, your whole philosophy seems to be like reclaiming play. and make space for deep work, given everything that's going on?

19Pallas: Ok, before we get to Molly's answer, I mentioned a manifesto. Yes, madcap factory has a manifesto. And I wanted to share it because I think it really gives you a sense of what Madcap factory means by reclaiming play. Here's Stephen with the Manifesto:

Stephen: We believe play is a basic human right. We think new experiences can slow time and improve memory. We take naps seriously and we take them often. We prefer high fives to handshakes. We play

games because they build character and community. We explore, ask questions, and continue to learn. We wear costumes and dance before work. We make things with our hands. We eat cookies and we also eat green things. We schedule meetings in unexpected places and always bring party hats to birthdays. We send handwritten mail to say ‘Hello,’ ‘I love you,’ & ‘Thank you.’ We believe time is our only finite currency. We believe in time well spent.

20Pallas: So again, how do we reclaim play and make space for deep work in the middle of a global pandemic?

Molly: It's interesting because I know I have these two companies where madcap is really focused on engagement and play and an. Sort of creativity and individualism. And then on the other side is Cave Day that's focusing so heavily on how we work. And I do think that there is an interesting balance there. I think if you can learn how to work better and more effectively and less amount of time, the rest of your time can be spent doing —other things that you know when you can be more intentional about the rest of your time.

21Pallas: Intentionality, Molly explains, is the key—to play, to work, and everything in between. We have power over how we spend our time.

Molly: We have to we have to act with intention so intentional, even intentional mindlessness. That's great. If you want to spend your time, if you're deciding I'm going to spend my time getting lost in a Netflix evening. That's great. But that is only your choice.

22Pallas: Now, some of this advice might at this point be seeming a bit contradictory—live with intention, but also be open to change (and likely lots of change) in your career. But, as Molly explains (and the Madcap manifesto emphasizes) these two seemingly contradictory points are actually part of a larger argument about time—how you spend your time and how you conceptualize spending time more broadly. To Molly, “time well spent” is being fully present in the, well, present. The future—all of those what ifs, projected scenarios, and potential dangers—is imagined, but the present is real. And life is really a continuous process of trying to figure out exactly HOW to be most present for yourself. Madcap factory and Caveday center around processes of introspection, not proscription. YOU have to decide how you work intentionally, how you play intentionally—others can help, but they can’t take you all the way there. Which applies to your career as well. These linear paths that musicians and academics find ourselves upon—envision for ourselves when we’re in school or trying to find work—are proscribed. They’re paved with things we should do, and what these things should look like, and the time frame these things should be done by. A series of concrete bricks that offer no flexibility and don’t take our unique identities and pasts and values into account.

This is also why it seems particularly daunting when musicians or academics attempt to move off these paths. The paths are unwieldy, but the space around them doesn’t tell us how to live our lives—but the whole point is that they shouldn’t. Because that’s something only we can figure out for ourselves. Living with intention is personal.

Molly is also quick to point out that changing careers doesn’t mean starting anew every single time. Your path might not always seem straightforward in the moment, but you’re building towards something, not demolishing your life with every change. A lot of the skills you acquire in the conservatory, for instance, can apply to other career paths.

Molly: As a performer, you you learn skills from the beginning of how to be with a group. not necessarily how you gather and how how you can invite people and make a group feel comfortable and how to

facilitate. But you get that skill of being in front of and being comfortable with the group. And I think at the same time, it's when I was doing the more the administrative work and I learned that the, you know, what happened behind the scenes, I learned I learned operations and I learned how I learned not necessarily the exact skills that I'm putting in place as it as a small business owner. But I learned how to be pragmatic and logistic. I think at the top of the conversation, I was saying, you know, stop looking at yourself as I am a musician. Yes. But how else what else are you or how else can you identify? I'm a person who makes music. I also make this. I also do this. Just looking at yourself as a musician, it's limiting. If you're wanted to be more entrepreneurial, you have to be your own, you know, you're your own business owner.

Pallas: We are musicians. We are academics. But we're also so much more than that. Keeping to one path for the rest of our lives or even restricting our imaginations when we think about what we might be able to do with our lives means we might miss opportunities, overlook other facets of our own identities. As Molly pointed out during the end of our discussion, career planning, inasmuch as we can plan our careers, should involve an element of discovery, should involve the freedom to explore directions that appear hazily but intriguingly in the distance. The unknown can be scary but also necessary and has the potential to reveal new constellations of ways that you can spend your life. The only question remains, are you brave enough to explore?

Stephen: Today's episode was written and reported by Pallas Catanella. She actually has a new project underway that's being funded in part by the IML Grant and Mentorship program which is a companion podcast and website to the Working PhDs project she mentioned at the top of the show. We're really excited to hear how that turns out, and will be sure to share a link to the Working PhDs podcast as soon as the first episode is ready. I'm so grateful to Pallas and the incredible work she did on this episode.

Also, thanks to Molly Sonsteng for sharing her time and story with us. Full disclosure, Molly is actually a friend of mine. She was in my wedding party and everything. We met and worked together at MSM, and now, when we have time, we share photos of our toddlers, reading recommendations, and whatever else we can. Molly's a top 10 human, and you should definitely check out some of her websites and learn more about Cave Day or Inconspicuous Games. A link to MadCap Factory will be in the show notes.

Today's episode was mixed in part by Zack Goldstein; the transcript was reviewed and cleaned up by Emma Gierszal; the episode was produced and scored by me and also contained music by Alexa Silverman.

As always, if you have questions, comments, ideas for an episode, please contact us. We'd love to collaborate. And if you liked this episode, share it with your friends and colleagues. That's a really great way to help us out.

Now, go out, make art, do good work. From the IML, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.