

Arts professionals adopt healthy lifestyle to fuel creative juices

By EMILY RITCHIE, REPORTER



Artist Nicole Kelly says rising daily at 5am has informed her work. Picture: Paul Wheeler

Simon Barker runs a 26km round trip from his home in Sydney's southwest to work at the Conservatorium of Music every day. And he does the entire trip barefoot.

This has been the drummer, composer and teacher's daily routine for three years. He says it clears his mind and informs his musical process. "I look to the things that are happening in my body as I'm running as source material to make music with," he says.

Barker's fascination with barefoot running began four years ago after he was introduced to it by guitarist Carl Dewhurst. Across time, Barker began to uncover similarities between running and drumming.

"The differences between the two activities became less and less until it felt like running was just another way to express the things I do in drumming," he says.

His latest album, *On Running*, was directly informed by his barefoot practice. "I try to transfer those cyclic feelings, pendulum motions and processing mind functions into music," he says.

Barker is one of a growing number of people in the Australian arts community who have turned to health and physical activity to inform their artistic practice. As society places more emphasis on

health and wellbeing, writers, actors, dancers and musicians are embracing this path to creativity, incorporating a healthy regimen of exercise and diet to help fuel their expressive needs.

It's a far cry, of course, from the cliched image of the artist who tries to derange their senses — to use Arthur Rimbaud's famous expression — to achieve creative success. From Rimbaud to Brett Whiteley, Kurt Cobain to Hunter S. Thompson, history is full of examples of artists turning to various forms of intoxication while pursuing their craft. These days, artists such as Adam Cullen, a heavy drinker and drug user who died in 2012 at the age of 46, seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

Japanese author Haruki Murakami has written extensively about the way running has changed his life and his writing. *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* details his foray into running at the age 33, and its impact on his health and capacity to create.

“Most of what I know about writing I've learned through running every day,” he says. By committing to the practice, he has learned physical lessons about focus and endurance, which he says are two of the most important qualities one needs as a writer. “Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits, that's the essence of running, and a metaphor for life — and for me, for writing as well.”

Barker believes the reason more musicians are leading healthy lives can be explained partly by fundamental changes to the music industry.

“The whole tortured-artist identity seems less and less prevalent,” he says. “The culture within the arts community, that idea of self-destruction, seems to have changed. Many of the opportunities that people follow are self-generated, so people need to be awake to keep generating new artistic opportunities. The days of a management company waking you up and dragging you to the next gig, that just doesn't happen. It's all about self-motivated people creating the career they inhabit.”

Children's author Andy Griffiths says there have been similar changes in the publishing industry, which now places a far greater emphasis on health, physical and mental.

“I've been with Pan Macmillan now for 16 or 17 years, and I've watched them change from the old-school publishing model — which was the long lunch where everyone's smoking and drinking — to the complete opposite. It's now very normal to go to the office gym, or do whatever exercise you want. It's been fascinating to watch that change.”

It was 10 years ago, when he first began heavily touring with his books (which include *The Day My Bum Went Psycho* and his popular *Just!* series), that Griffiths began to incorporate a healthy eating and exercise regimen into his day.

“It was about survival at first,” he says. “There's nothing worse than facing a five to six-hour book-signing queue with a raging hangover.”

The Melbourne author now wakes at 6am every day and dedicates the first two hours to reading, drinking coffee and engaging in high-intensity exercise.

“I'll do either a high-intensity 20 to 30-minute bike ride or run and on alternate days I'll do circuit training with weights,” he says. “I make sure that by 8am I have done an hour of reading and an hour of exercise so that neither of those very important activities can get knocked out by whatever's going on in the day.”

Griffiths also has a “sensible” diet, which consists of largely vegetarian food, and he has cut sugar out for a year. He says the change of lifestyle has enabled him to commit fully to his writing.

“Feeling energised and optimistic is essential for what I do and my lifestyle is key in helping me feel that way,” he says. “Because I write humour, which has an energising effect on the reader, I can’t imagine writing when I’m feeling bad for whatever reason ... I find exercise supports that process. It’s meditative and releases tension.”

Chloe Dallimore, a singer, actress and Pilates instructor, says the life of a performer can be isolated and actors have long struggled with the adverse emotional effects of embodying certain characters up to eight times a week.

“Actors have to replicate emotions that are not their own, which requires a certain brain space and a certain mental type,” she says. “Various psychologists have found that the level of empathy in performers is unparalleled and that there are various coping mechanisms involved in the job.”

As president of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance equity division, Dallimore advocates for actors’ working conditions. She says more actors are engaging in healthy lifestyles, and the industry has taken many positive steps in the past two decades to promote healthy working environments.

“Producers now often have on-site physiotherapists and some will bring a professional in to debrief the cast as they exit a project, which is a positive step.”

She also says performers are taking greater care when it comes to diet and exercise, and this in turn helps them sustain their careers.

“When I started in the industry in 1996,” she says, “self-care was not something that we were conscious of. The common routine at intervals was coffee and a cigarette, but now so much has changed for the positive. Performers are very aware that their body is their tool and they are taking responsibility for that.”

Nicole Kelly, a 29-year-old artist from Sydney’s south, finds adhering to a strict sleeping schedule and diet beneficial to her creative process. The painter goes to bed at 8.30pm (even on weekends) and rises at 5am, which means she sees the sunrise every morning.

“It’s truly beautiful, I can’t describe how amazing I feel,” she says. “It’s all geared around painting because I want to be in the best possible state to make the work.”

Every morning Kelly does yoga, goes surfing or takes a long walk on the beach. It’s a rigorous routine first sparked by the breakdown of a long-term relationship. “I clicked into this survival mode and I had to change my lifestyle to get through,” she says. “But now it’s become a really integral part of who I am and what I do.”

Kelly, who won the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship in 2009 and at 22 is still the youngest to have done so, can see the benefits in her work from these choices. “The early morning light has penetrated my mind and definitely influenced my work,” she says. “Over the last year I’ve compared the photos I’ve taken of the sunrise with my paintings and noticed that the colour palette is surprisingly similar, which is a direct result of my early waking time.”

She also believes the practice has brought about greater mental clarity.

“I’m able to be fully present and not have my senses dulled by alcohol, drugs or fatigue,” she says. “If I have more than a drink or two when I paint I don’t make good decisions and I’m not fully with the work. This lifestyle of mine is all about setting up a space where I can make really confident, strong decisions in my art making.”

Kelly doubts whether anyone lost in a void of drugs and alcohol would be able to achieve success and then maintain it in the present art landscape of Australia.

“These days you have to do a lot of your own marketing,” she says. “You almost don’t exist as an artist if you’re not on social media. And in terms of writing applications, applying for residencies and all of those things — you can’t be lost in a vortex of drunkenness or drugs when you’ve got to be productive like that.”

She continues: “The image of what people want artists to be has changed. There certainly is a notion in history of the poor, struggling artist, and maybe artists, without really knowing it, were playing into that. But being an artist doesn’t equal that any more. There’s been a cultural shift — thank goodness.”