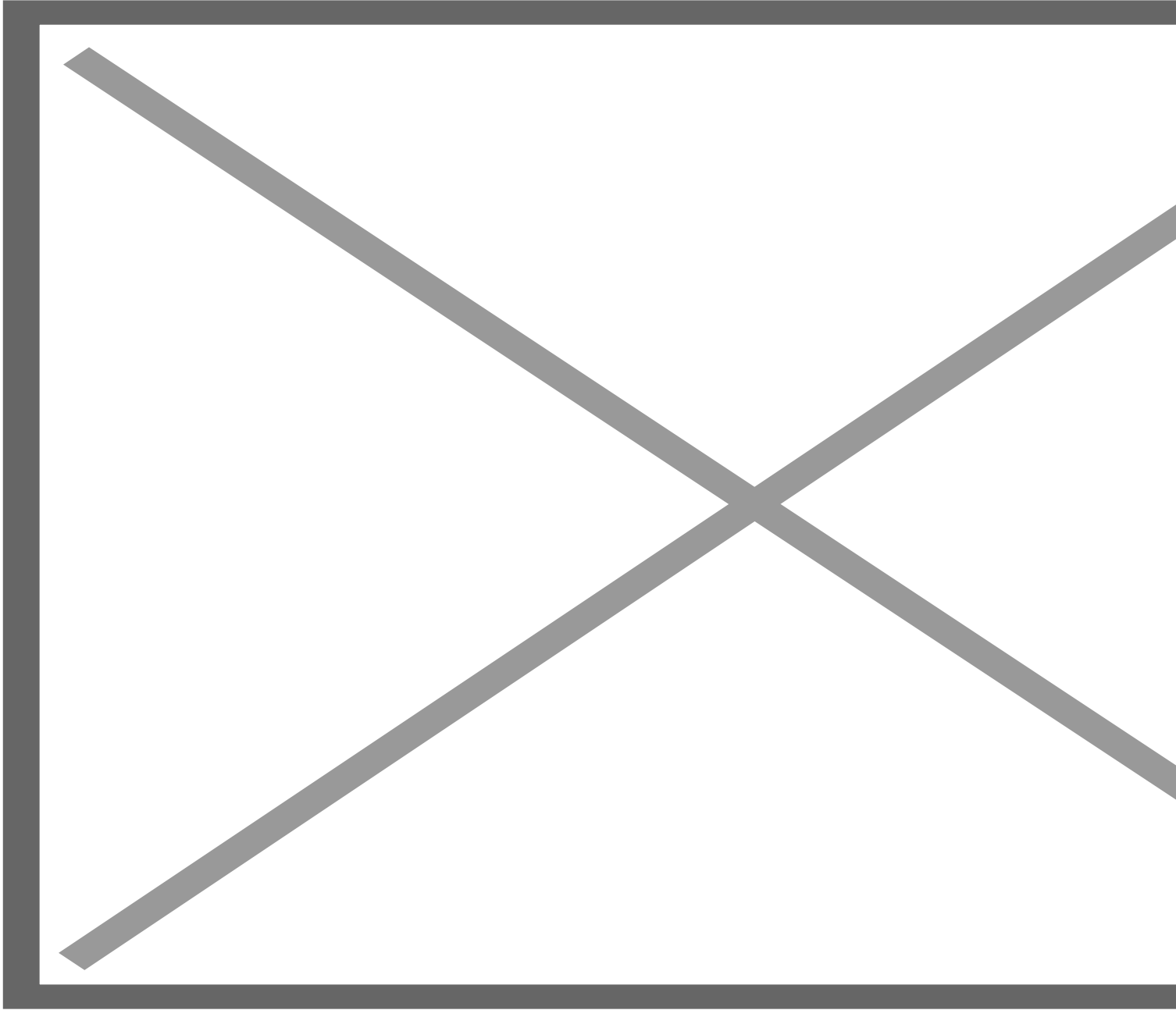


Learning from people who can't quit

Musicians never stop being musicians. I hope it's the same for justice seekers.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

Published on November 20, 2025



Century illustration (Sources images: Getty)

I'm going to let all you nonmusicians in on a little secret: We musicians never stop being musicians. We might stop releasing new music, and we might stop blessing (or spamming) your timeline with our gigs and merch. But a musician never stops making music, thinking in music, and living in music.

Most of us who pursue music as a career, however, do at some point stop—because of finances, because of fear, because of a lack of momentum, because something else requires more of our time. (Note to musicians: Please don't blame your family for the fact that you "didn't make it.") There are plenty of reasons to quit.

*Should I keep trying?* I've been asking this question a lot lately, about my career as an indie rapper but also about other things: pastoring, building community, defying capitalism. In an era when we seem to be following opposite impulses as a collective, the question of whether to stop or not feels urgent for the church—not because we don't know the answer but because the energy level required to express some coherent, uniting, moral vision of the gospel feels higher than ever, almost Bonhoeffer-esque, and many of us are feeling the cost. It's one thing to promise God you'll run through a brick wall for the kingdom—however you imagine it—but running *into* a brick wall, over and over again, is a different exercise.

I think many of us, when we commit to our faith, believe that things will quickly begin to work out. Whether it's the Goethe quote ("At the moment of commitment the universe conspires to assist you") or the Paulo Coelho one ("When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it"), there's a sense that if something isn't happening, it's because of you. The proliferation of self-help philosophies only magnifies this sense of personal responsibility—and ultimately self-judgment—when the thing you want doesn't happen, not even if you want it really bad. Now it's your fault. Now the arc of the moral universe feels a little less bent toward justice because you weren't enough.

But any musician who has "gone for it" will tell you that no one has ever wanted it more than they did and that regardless of the talent one possesses and the work one puts in, it requires a vast sum of sheer luck to get anywhere near "making it." You know what else it requires? All of you. You have to be willing to travel on a moment's notice, to maintain eye contact in a conversation while you're focused instead on a melody stuck in your head (it's a gift, and I'm sorry), and to put the winding path of music beyond—and perhaps over—any other relationship. And that's just for the chance: You still have to nail the performance, audience, and packaging. Whoever your favorite artist is, know that it is truly an act of God (in the insurance industry sense) that you ever got to hear them at all.

It takes a lot, and the people who decide to keep going aren't doing so because they have some divination that they will magically avoid the brick wall this time. It's because they *can't* quit. It's because progress—however infinitesimal and unnoticed by us—feels like a mustard seed in their hand, and this is enough to get them to the next show, the next recording session. The stubborn musician knows something: *I'm not running into this wall*. And they know this while also knowing they are indeed running into a great and massive wall, having concussed themselves and their surrounding relationships many times. You and I can clearly see they are running into that wall. But that's not how they see it—they think they're tearing it down. And they know that each moment—each success as well as each apparent failure—is actually getting them closer. Every impact loosens the bricks.

You're reading this column in a world that seems ablaze, and at certain points you may ask yourself, "What's the point of trying?" Then you might judge yourself for asking this and try to shake yourself immediately back into hope. Try not to leave that space so quickly. Remember that the disciples themselves said, *Jesus, we've been fishing all night and caught nothing. We'd like to stop trying now*. These were professional fishermen, so you know they had strategies and best practices, yet it still didn't work. And Jesus had to say to his unmerry band of would-be quitters, "Cast your net again." To his favorite and most loyal followers he said, "Try again."

This suggests to me that whatever else Jesus was—the son of God or not, fully divine or otherwise, without sin or whatever—he was most certainly a traveling indie musician.

Keep trying. All you justice-seeking folks out there who feel like you're running into a mighty wall of White Christian nationalist brickery: Keep trying. Women fighting for equal pay and recognition, trans folk fighting to be seen: Keep trying. All of us working to protect, feed, visit, conserve, share, empower, and collaborate in a world that seems to be moving in the opposite direction: Don't stop here. Cast your net again. The sermon that feels like pissing into the wind is progress. The relationship you build with your neighbor, the silence you break, the vision of a loving and inclusive God that you refuse to break away from—these things are indeed loosening the bricks, even if it doesn't feel like it right now. Take care of yourself, and try again.

The world needs your music.