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What It Really Takes To Get Billed At Coachella

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- MAR 31, 2016 4:05 PM
- [KATIE O'DONNELL](#)

Zella Day is a trooper. It's the day after her [21st birthday party](#) — a 70-guest bash at an '80s-themed spot in L.A. — and she's finishing up a whirlwind press day when she answers her phone for our interview. "I'm hanging on by a thread, but hanging on," she assures me on her ride home to Silver Lake. These days, Day is used to the hustle. The rising singer-songwriter has a [hit single](#), a 100-plus-stop international tour, and a coveted spot on stage at Coachella. And this is all just two years after signing her first record deal.

Despite being one of the smaller-font acts on the fest's lineup, Day has been putting out music and amassing followers for years. (When I ask, she describes her sound as "organic-pop-rock-psychedelic-Western.") Just weeks out from the big show, the small-town Arizona native fittingly models the H&M Loves Coachella collection and reflects on her intense, post-album-release sprint to Indio.

From the ugly truths of motel-living to the squad she's relied on to get this far, read on to see how it's all added up to this career-changing moment.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAT BORCHART.

Day's own accessories.

Hey, Zella. So how does booking Coachella actually work? Was it something you'd thought of as being in the realm of possibility beforehand?

"They approach you, so we got an email that I was requested to play. I was in Texas doing radio promo, and I had just eaten the biggest barbecue lunch of my life. I checked my email with my barbecue fingers and freaked out. I shoot high and I played lots of festivals last year, so it was definitely on my list of priorities. I didn't *expect* it, but I was working for it."

Right. You've been working hard promoting *Kicker*, your full-length debut. What have the eight months since it landed looked like for you?

"I played about 120 shows last year. I was all over Europe, including Russia, and it's going to keep going. I'm going to route out of Coachella and do some headline dates, and I also have dates supporting Michael Franti."

That sounds exhausting, especially with this being your first real, extensive tour.

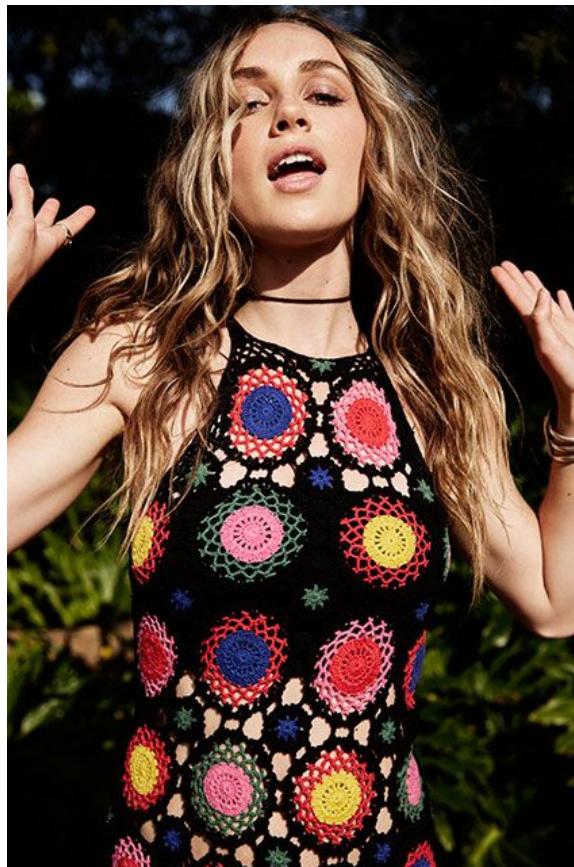
"Yeah, it's been a testament to whether or not I really wanted this. Being away from home and having to run off of little or no sleep is really difficult. It's a grind to stay in a different hotel in the middle of nowhere every night and have only fast food for the next 300 miles."

190 TOUR DATES. 100,000 MILES
TRAVELED. 200 DAYS AWAY FROM HOME.
12 SONGS PER SHOW. 5 HOURS OF SLEEP
(ON A GOOD NIGHT).



Being on the road for such a long stretch would probably take a physical and mental toll on most people. What's the most challenging part for you?

"I'm a very clean, conscious eater, and I have to be. At the end of the day, there's no makeup that can save me from eating a greasy hamburger and french fries. In L.A., healthy food is so accessible. But being on the road for months, I look for a good grocery store where I can get snacks to keep me happy — and a good coffee shop! Also I can't go without breakfast, so I'm always searching for restaurants and making the boys in my band get up 45 minutes before call time so we can go eat together."



PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAT BORCHART.

Speaking of the guys in your band, what's the dynamic like when you're traveling all over together, like when you're stuck driving for 13 hours straight?

"We can't get away from each other on tour, so it starts to become this family. Like, you can't live with them, can't live without them. When we're in the van, that's quiet time. Everybody is relaxing, decompressing, taking a moment to themselves with their headphones on. Because you can't really get any alone time. And, of course, we get annoyed with each other, but we also have the most fun with each other."

Do you ever get any free time to just hang out and explore as a squad?

"When we were in Fresno, we had a full day off so we spent time walking around the city, going into vintage stores, going to a brewery. That night we went to a bowling alley and ate popcorn and cotton candy and drank beer with the other band. So you do have these beautiful nights where you're like, *Wow, it's so cool to be living like this in this moment with these people.*"

AVERAGE AGE OF THE MEMBERS OF DAY'S BAND: 28.5 (7.5 YEARS OLDER THAN DAY).

That sounds pretty great. Obviously your band is a major part of your musical act. Who else helps bring the rest of your creative vision to life?

"My mom actually makes all of my merchandise. And my best friend Brittney Moore is my stylist. She's incredible. My other best friend is a director. I do my day-by-days with him — they're 15-second videos on my Instagram that are like little journal entries. Also, my boyfriend is an amazing photographer, and he went on the road with me last year and documented the tour. So yeah, I have really good people around me that I love very much. I couldn't be happy if I was having these moments of success and accomplishment alone."

It's interesting that the people you're closest with are so involved in your career.

"Yeah, I've always been that way. It makes me feel happiest knowing the people I'm working closely with truly love and want what's best for me, which can be hard to find. It's really a convoluted industry, so I've figured out a way to keep my family and friends close."

It sounds especially awesome to have your best girlfriend at your side. What does your working relationship involve?

"We are creating together constantly. She helps me put looks together and packs my bags for tour. She's also a photographer, so we're always documenting our fashion story. We have so many photos of outfits I've been wearing over the past year that we haven't even released on my social channels."

And you wear a different outfit for every show, right? That's a ton of looks.

"Yeah, especially when you're in the festival circuit. It's just one after another. Coachella's my first this year, but this one's going to be really festival-heavy again."

AGE DAY STARTED PLAYING MUSIC: 9.
LARGEST CROWD SHE'S PERFORMED IN
FRONT OF SO FAR: 30,000.



You have such a distinct '60s- and '70s-influenced aesthetic. Is what you wear to perform essentially your everyday style, or is it more like dressing up?

"Being on stage is a more amplified version of who I am and what I like. I wear some of my best pieces up there. I also think about lights and movement, like what dress or skirt flows well, what's going to photograph beautifully, and — since everybody's looking up at me — what's going to look good from

that perspective. I've had moments where I'm wearing too short of a dress and it affects the way I'm singing because I'm self-conscious about anyone seeing my butt cheeks. So you have to make sure you're completely comfortable going on stage."

As a new artist building your brand, what image are you looking to project up there?

"My style is strong and confident, but also there's this sexuality that comes with the clothes I wear without showing too much skin. There's nothing wrong with showing skin — I like boobs as much as the next person — but I do it in a way where I get to preserve some power."



With Coachella creeping closer, how is your rehearsal schedule ramping up?

"We're going to do three straight six-hour days, so it's going to feel like we've been on tour. We're the best when we've been touring for a month straight, so we need to get back to that point. Three days is not a month obviously, but it's good enough. I also have some visual stuff I'm going to be playing around with, and I'm bringing in a surprise artist for one of my songs, so he's going to be in on the rehearsals, too. It's definitely more of a production than it's ever been, which is exciting. It's really nice to raise the bar."

It definitely seems like a good time to go big. Are you thinking about this opportunity as one that could be a game-changer for you?

"The most excitement about this particular festival is the level of exposure. Because of it, I'm doing an interview for a fashion story right now, and that's a big part of Coachella. There are so many different elements and contributors that go into the whole experience. It's fashion, it's music, it's so many influencers. And to be a part of both weekends is more exposure than I've ever had at a festival. Right now in my career that's really important. So it's a blessing."

COACHELLA 2016: 17 YEARS STRONG. 6 DAYS. 169 ACTS.



Totally. Some people might be stressed out by that kind of pressure, though. Are you nervous?

"This has been something I've been talking about for five, six months, so the fact that it's here makes me feel anxious more than nervous. I just want the weekend to be here already because going in it's a big question mark as to what it's going to be like: the parties and the events and the show and the outfits I'm wearing and the people I'm going to talk to. You don't know until you get there."

Take me backstage with you, right before you're about to go on. What are you doing?

"I like finding a quiet place and taking a moment to get centered. It's always good before getting onstage to remind yourself why you're playing shows and who you're doing it for. Even on my hardest days on tour, the crowd doesn't know what kind of day I've had, nor do they really care. They're there to hear your music and have a good time. I have to remind myself to leave all my baggage behind and really just give people what they came to be a part of — music and forgetting about the outside world for a moment."

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAT BORCHART; STYLED BY SUE CHOI; HAIR AND MAKEUP
BY CHRISTINE NELLI