

Jessica Zollman

PHOTOGRAPHER



LA-based photographer Jessica Zollman, aka Jayzombie, recalls her love of photography that started in childhood with her father's obsession over taking pictures. After her dad unexpectedly passed away, her path eventually led her full-circle back to her first love of shooting, with stops along the way, like studying music business and serving as Instagram's community manager and fifth employee. Here, Jessica opens up about how vulnerability plays into her creativity, the importance of self-care, and the challenges and rewards of turning her passion project into her full-time **gig**.

Tell me about where you grew up and how your childhood influenced your ideas about creativity ? I was born in Detroit, MI. My mom is Canadian and her side of the family is from Toronto. My dad grew up in a suburb outside of Chicago, so Detroit was in the middle between each set of grandparents. We lived in Detroit for three years and most of my memories are of my dad with a camera in front of his face. The photos from my childhood are of me and my mom—there are very few of me with my dad because my mom didn't know what to do with a camera.



After my dad passed away, I took a lot of pictures with those disposable Kodak film cameras. It was my way of making sure memories were still being captured. Those were my earliest memories of me being creative.

My dad had been an entrepreneur and my mom worked her ass off as a single parent. She's not a creative person, but she has this drive and passion for family, which has been instilled in me as a result of being raised by pretty much the most badass single mom on the face of the earth." ...if something you're excited about doesn't work out the way you expect, it's okay to roll with it. Let life take you where it wants to." tree with pink flowers and pink 99 cent store awning woman looking into the light with patterned background

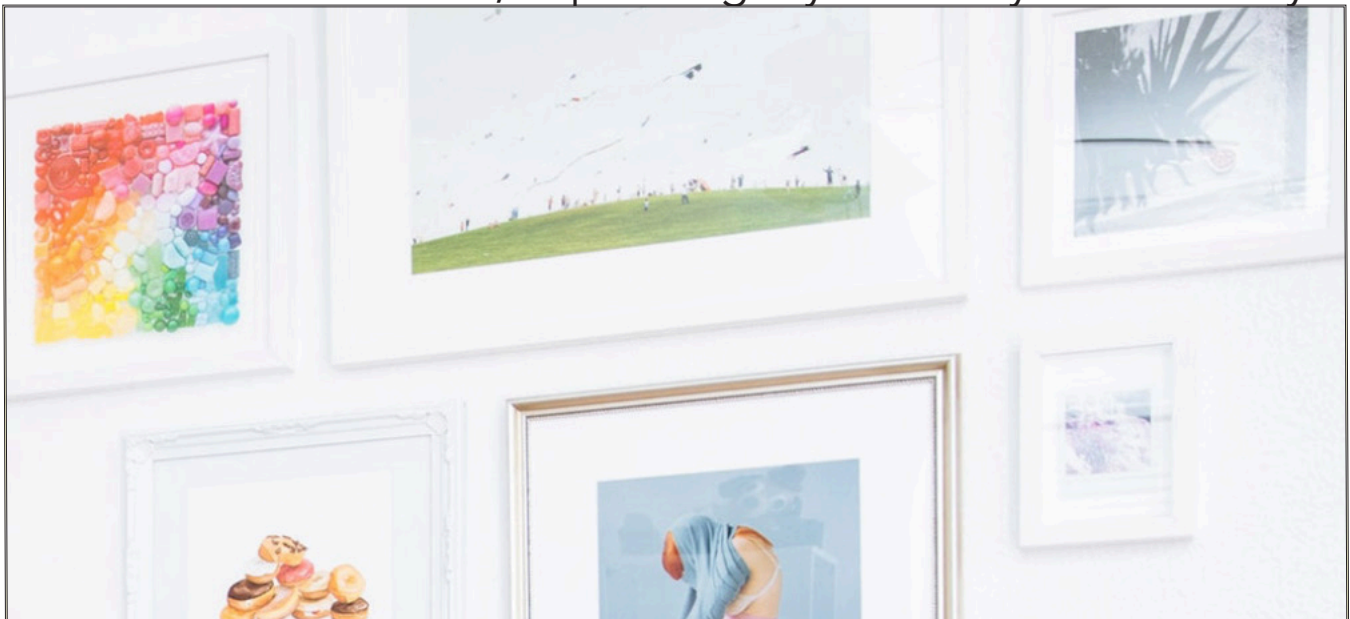
So you gravitated toward photography after your dad passed, but did you continue to embrace it as you grew older?

I'm going to get personal and give context about why I'm asking. My mom died when I was ten and experiencing that trauma early on led me to believe that I needed to be practical so I could support myself. There was a tug of war between the pragmatic, self-sufficient part of me and the side that wanted to risk and do something creative. Is that something you wrestled with? I definitely wrestled with that.

"...if something you're excited about doesn't work out the way you expect, it's okay to roll with it. Let life take you where it wants to."

My mom did an incredible job of encouraging me to try a million different things. Before she settled into her current career, she was a seamstress, then an elementary school teacher, then she worked in the restaurant industry, and when we moved to California she got into meeting planning. She never raised me to think I could only be one thing. She encouraged me to live multiple lives and find out what I'm interested in, because that might change with age. She wanted me to explore.

I will say that I was put into therapy after my dad died, and being so young, I did a lot of drawing. I was in therapy from ages four to six, and it was all based around creativity. As a kid, it's hard to communicate your feelings, so creativity was the best tool to do that. For me, expressing my creativity is absolutely



There was a period of my life where I rejected photos and hated photography during my teenage years. I didn't even want photos of me to be taken. I had a bat mitzvah because my dad wanted me to be raised Jewish; my mom was not Jewish at the time. For me, it was a symbolic way of honoring my dad and I think it was important for it to be documented, but having my photo taken at that was traumatizing, and I could feel myself being torn apart emotionally.

When photography became a part of your life again, was it something you had considered making a living from? Not at all. That wasn't until much later. At 17, I was still lost and confused. I didn't know who I was.

I grew up in a town in the East Bay that's extremely white, mostly upper middle class, and very Republican. There was something strange and unnerving about it. I embraced a lot weirder things, but on the surface I still fit into my neighborhood. I stayed at home and went to junior college first so I could save money to live in a different city.



My college graduation gift was a camera. I couldn't tell you the model, but it wasn't fancy. It was an entry-level DSLR. I was obsessed and took so many photos, but I still had no idea that photography would be my thing. As I started to find myself and went back to therapy as a 20-year-old to find meaning in the major life events that happened to me, my creativity continued to grow stronger and I was more willing to be vulnerable, which I think directly corresponds with me fully embracing being a creative for a living.

“My college graduation gift was a camera. I couldn’t tell you the model, but it wasn’t fancy. It was an entry-level DSLR. I was obsessed and took so many photos, but I still had no idea that photography would be my thing.”



Tell me about the timeline after college.

You got involved in the tech world and were the fifth employee at Instagram. What led up to that role? I moved back home after I graduated college and worked for my mom for a year. I got into a major car accident during that time, and I broke my nose in three places and deviated my septum. It was the best and worst timing ever. It was super traumatic and I had to get a septorhinoplasty. I really struggled with my identity after I was forced to have a nose job. I had a stronger nose before thanks to my extremely Jewish father, and I came out of it with a more cute and “normal” nose like my mom’s.

The struggle with identity and the pain that came with it had a big impact on my life. My face didn't look like me and it made taking photos really hard—it turns out you put your camera to your nose a lot. I documented my healing process, got better, and moved to San Francisco. I took photos of friends' bands and started classes at the University of San Francisco. They have night courses to earn a music and recording industry certification. I figured that if I was going to do anything photography-related in the music industry, then I should know the industry. I think it was the creative and practical sides at battle with each other again. I got my certification and then asked, now what? What does this mean? How is it important, and how will I make money?

During that time, I got an internship at Spin magazine. They were doing a project called Spin Earth where they collected stories about local bands with articles written by people in those cities. It was a social media offshoot about music. I was an unpaid intern doing community management and the end of that internship was supposed to result in a job, but it didn't. Turns out Spin wasn't doing great and they cut funding. I needed to find a job because I had to make money. At that point, I was coasting off of the savings I had from the year I worked for my mom and the settlement from the car accident since I was not at fault.

My friend worked at Second Life and told me that I could work in support there if I really needed a job. I dropped my confusing and unclear dreams of working in the music industry so I could live for a little bit.

Design for journalism/Jade Connan/Dylan Greif/ The Great Discontent Article