On finding connection

Sleater-Kinney co-founder and *Portlandia* co-creator Carrie Brownstein discusses the transformative power of grief, the importance of time off, and the value of just doing the tasks of living.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2456 words.

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From the outside, it seems like your schedule must be jam-packed. How important is time off for you as a person making creative work?

Of course, I think you need intake in order to have output, so you have to have time that's contemplative. You have to be porous and curious and you can't always just put that into a spot on the calendar. So in my day-to-day I do a lot of walking and hiking and being out in nature in order to just have time that's reflective.

I was thinking yesterday about the concept of around-ness, where you have a type of friend that you can just be around and feel ease. It's really comforting to have someone that can help your mind actually just rest.

Yeah, I love that concept. I really value the people with whom I can be around without necessarily intense interaction, but just sort of the pleasure of their company, drifting in and out of conversation, drifting in and out of togetherness. It's almost ambience. It's intentional tuning in to people, but also able to tune them out as well and have that be sort of a tacit agreement.

But that can unlock creativity too. And since you're not just a musician, you do so many different things, you must need different ways of generating creativity. I can imagine you have to be intentional with that process to a degree.

Intentional is the right word. It's really about understanding that I can be inspired by being present with people, that there is an edification that comes from being able to be present in a situation. This idea that we're always trying to buy more time or sort of biohack our way through life, just looking for maximum efficiency, is endemic everywhere, especially in Western culture. It must just be a product of late-stage capitalism as it emerges with technology, but I try not to put inordinate value on productivity.

I am also an introvert, so because I don't glean energy from large social interactions, I am pretty deliberate about what I do on a given day and who I hang out with. I get really frustrated when someone's only talking about all the work they're doing, or sort of describing everything as work. We've really compartmentalized it. Because if you separate work from pleasure, then you can monetize both. But I find them very intertwined. Ideally, there's sort of a seamlessness where sometimes, sure, I have to sit down and write and there is a task at hand, but otherwise I'm just trying to live my life, and work and pleasure are very much coexisting.

There have been all those articles about how it's so addictive to say how busy you are. I love boredom and how inextricable it is from creativity. And if you're touring for so long, you're not going to just keep busy all the time in these moments between tours but if a song comes to your mind, you'll write it.

Yeah. It’s allowing openness for input. There’s something very insular that can start to happen if you don’t expose yourself to the everyday. You don’t make yourself a participant. And I do love participating in the ordinary. I love coming home and just doing the tasks of living. It’s interesting to me. The sort of quotidian interactions that you end up having with someone at the grocery store or someone at the dry cleaners, there’s something about that that grounds me.

If I’m too much in my own head, I feel like I’m sort of nowhere, that I’m almost overly curating my experience. If I just have headphones in and I go into a store, it’s like, “Well, I could just be anywhere because I’m sort of dismissing the environment.” So I try not to put headphones in.

People suffer from anxieties and insecurities, but the notion of a tortured artist or a lone genius, it feels antiquated. We’re starting to dismantle that idea. And people who I admire, someone like Nick Cave, he just unapologetically places himself in the world because it speaks to a vulnerability. It speaks to experience to understand that what people want is connection. Or someone like David Byrne who just bikes everywhere. That’s such the antithesis of this idea of this artist up in this vaunted work space to which no one has access. Great art does not necessarily come from a place that’s insular.

I do think it’s sort of a trick, because to forge your own path you have to eschew the noise and whatnot. But you also have to reckon with the task of being human if your aim is to connect with other people.

What was your concept of an artist when you were a child?

Well, certainly there was a greater mystery [back then] because we didn’t have social media or a means of demystifying who the artist was. So there was often a huge gulf between what we imagined and who they were. And sometimes I miss that mystery, just the ability to project, but not necessarily have definitive answers or know what someone is eating for breakfast or what their living room looks like.

I imagined a level of glamor, probably also a level of despair. I think about authors that I looked up to, whether it was Dorothy Parker, Virginia Woolf, or Carson McCullers, some authors I read when I was younger in my formative years, and they did have tragic lives. And so I just imagined this sadness permeating the artist’s life. And then musicians who I admired when I was really young, I was obsessed with Madonna when I was in grade school, and she was larger than life. I never really thought about the work or what their day looked like in terms of actually writing or actually recording. That process was very unknown to me. I was obsessed with actors. I looked back at the golden age of Hollywood, like Greta Garbo, and I was absolutely obsessed. She was always just walking alone in her old age, lived alone in New York City. There was a real sense of isolation, that her world had narrowed.

It wasn’t until I started creating myself that I realized there was a spectrum here. And often what people were conveying or invoking may not necessarily have been accurate. Some of that is a contrivance, some of that is a misinterpretation, that it’s easier to have somebody be a figure that represents sorrow for us, and so we just assume that their whole life was sad. So I think I started to understand the way that life is more complicated.

I think keeping part of the process a little bit mysterious is good, but I also love a documentary. I love a “Behind the Music.” You want that dissection, want to understand how something came to be. But when I was younger, I was less interested in that and more interested in the final product, whether it was the person themselves or their work. And now that I actually do my own writing or my own music making, my own directing, I do want to know how, I want that explained. I want information to be shared. Because then you learn from it.

I’ve always gotten the sense that community is important to how you approach your music and your art as well. Working in a band is always going to be on some level trying to balance your own creativity with how others work. At this moment in your career, does that balance differ for you at all? What about when you bring in someone like John Congleton, as you did for your new album, *Little Rope*?

Collaboration has always been very important to me and something that I don’t struggle with. I would consider myself a good creative collaborator. And I like the theory that the sum is greater than the sum of its parts.

Especially with songwriting, or even what I did with Fred Armisen on *Portlandia*, that it was a combination of sensibilities and that ideas could be bettered. It wasn't about resource guarding. Something about the conversation could improve upon the original idea or surprise you.

I think it's because I started so young with Sleater-Kinney. I was 20 years old. And so that became very formative for me. That is how I understood myself as a creative person. It actually was more difficult to venture out on my own when I wrote a memoir. That was me by myself.

And a producer like John Congleton, we had written the album and the album was arranged, but he came in and wanted a cohesive world. He understood the strength of the band, and he knew what he wanted to elicit and evoke from us in terms of performance. And he created this landscape for us, and was unafraid to embrace the messiness of it and the ugliness of it. When you're bringing material that's vulnerable to a new interlocutor, it is a little bit of a leap of faith that they will be delicate, that they'll be careful, but that also they don't see that fragility as weakness, that they see that fragility as being strength and also that it can be messed with, that it can be transformed. That they say, "Okay, here's this vulnerability. Let's amplify it until it feels triumphant or until you're expressing something that is more, something that can't just be pigeonholed." It's not characterizing it as diminutive, but characterizing it as something that can be grand, something that can sit next to joy. So you have to really trust that they understand the dimension of grief or they understand the dimension of vulnerability.

Ultimately, it's not a diary. This is an artistic endeavor. So you are sort of saying, "I'm bringing this to you. And yes, it stems from a place, in my case of losing my mother, a lot of this album. But loss is also very much part of life, and I'm still here, so I am grasping or grappling with the task of being alive. And the fact that death is part of life."

So yeah, it's really about trusting that experiences are transformational and transportive, that you can start in one place and arrive in another, and that the listener can be transported. The best collaborators have that goal in mind: "Let's take this somewhere unexpected. We are not predicting the end at the beginning. We don't know."

I'm so sorry about your loss. I lost my dad recently too. A car accident is unimaginable. And when you go through something like that, sometimes you want every teeny thing to feel so raw and ruinous. I loved what you said now about working with somebody that takes the work seriously but doesn't treat you or the work as overly fragile. Sometimes you need things to be broken, and it sounds like that on *Little Rope*. The fact that you were able to lean into your pain as a way to reshape the material you were working on is incredible.

We had four or five songs actually recorded, and then we had the task of completing the album. We had more songs to write, we had recording dates coming up at the end of the year, and then the accident occurred in September. Her death was so sudden and traumatic that I needed the music to be all the things that I couldn't be. I just felt very incoherent and disoriented, and music gave a shape to a very nebulous void for me. Literally just picking up a guitar and playing, that was a choreography that I knew. I didn't know the choreography of grief. I didn't know what the next hour or day or week would look or feel like. But I know what the neck of my guitar feels like. I know what the strings of my guitar feel like. So that allowed me not just a respite, but something to do. I was making something at a time when I felt unmade, and it was like praying to play guitar. It was a continual wish to be alive by doing something. I'm basically saying, "I want to be here." Every note was just a prayer. "Thank you for letting me be here. Whatever this is."

What was it like to go through that alongside Corin, someone you've spent so much of your life with?

It is grounding in that way. Having Corin was very helpful, and you are sort of reminded of the confidence and what's stable, but also that those things can be undermined very quickly. You learn to value those things in a way that I think is important, in a way that you, unfortunately, sometimes you don't value those things until something like this happens.

Were you surprised about anything in yourself while finishing this album, in your ability to carry on?

I was just grateful for the vessel that is Sleater-Kinney, what we can put inside of it, and that year after year we have urgency and restlessness. And that those things are perennial, that there isn't the cessation of desire or longing. If you're lucky, there isn't stasis. There is just a constant infusion of want and need. It was surprising just to feel that fire and to hear it when I listened to this record. It's very rewarding.

Carrie Brownstein recommends:

Amusing Ourselves To Death by Neil Postman. Sometimes I like to remind myself that the predicament of distraction is perennial, and one we've been warned about for a while now. A good read before you return to the endless scroll.

Dear Joan and Jericha podcast. Julia Davis and Vicky Pepperdine play batty, outright disgusting and highly inappropriate advice columnists. Any time I need to laugh, I replay these episodes. The Platinum Jubilee Special is particularly rich.

North Woods by Daniel Mason. I loved this meditation on place, the way land shapes its inhabitants and vice versa. And the cruel, unforgiving passage of time, turning each of us into dust and back towards the mystery from whence we came.

Thelonious Monk's *Straight No Chaser*. This is the only album I've ever owned that I listen to once a week. Every Sunday morning. If this isn't the one for you, then find another one to ritualize and memorize.

Moonstruck. Peak Cher. Peak Nicolas Cage. Probably peak Danny Aiello and Olivia Dukakis. That's a lot of peaking for one film.

Name
Carrie Brownstein

Vocation
actor and musician

Keshia Eugene