

Circuit des Yeux on finding your true self through your work



October 26, 2017 - Circuit des Yeux is the project of Haley Fohr, who has been releasing music since the age of 18. Her latest album, Reaching for Indigo, is out on Drag City, and focuses on a specific turning point in her life. Here, Fohr discusses the influence of environment on her work, how failure can lead to success, and offers five secret self-help actions.

As told to Gary Canino, 1473 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

You've described your own music as channeling an "opaque, transcendent spirit." Do you view music as a channeling process, or is it not always this innate?

For me, it's not a spirit, it's my true self. Ever since I can remember, I've felt confused and conflicted about just being present on earth. It's only when I'm playing music and performing and creating that I feel totally whole and accepted in this universe.

That's my own personal experience, but I do believe music's a universal language—and maybe an intergalactic language. That's why my interests peaked in ethnomusicology. Superseding language and reducing interaction to the sound that anything can make rides on the spiritual, for sure, but it's more just otherworldly and unexplained.

I think you're tethered to yourself. You can't really help what comes out to a certain extent. It is what it is, which is beautiful. It's all relative—what's "good" or "bad"—even if it's maybe not to your taste.

Do you have a hard time playing recordings of your own music for others?

I really hate it. I get so self-conscious. I'm one of those people that can perform to 2,000 people with no problem, but if it's three people and they're my best friends or my mom, I'm so nervous. When you've created something, it's sacred; I hold it close to me like a secret for as long as I can, until whenever it's supposed to be put into the world. It's almost like a dream.

Have you ever had a really vivid dream, and tried to retell it to someone, and then you feel like it kind of loses its power? It's kind of similar for me in music. Things that have profound definition deserve to be treated in a special light. It shouldn't be casual, because it isn't. Those things really define you.

Bonnie Prince Billy once spoke about how listening to music with another person present can change your perception of listening to it.

I agree with that. Listening to something with a close friend can open up my mind, and I can hear things in a new way. But if I'm listening to something in a movie theater with a bunch of people around me, or on the radio at a supermarket, I'm definitely listening to it in a different way as well.

Much of the lyrics on Reaching for Indigo are addressed to "you." Is that something you've done on purpose?

The pronoun choice is intentional. It shifted on my two albums. Before that, it would come from a personal place, but it wasn't really directed outwards until 2015. I feel like with this new album, it was a return to the personal, but there was this extra step involved, where I'm really trying to reach out in a more universal way, however niche my music may seem to certain people. The "you" is a device to try to attain that goal, I guess.

Do you believe in music coming from a certain place? You're originally from Indiana and now live in Chicago. Would you think of your music as coming from the Midwest?

After playing music for a decade, it's hard not to admit that there are some Midwestern tendencies involved in my practice. I also think it's dependent on where I am in the moment. If I'm writing a song in LA, it sounds different than if I'm writing a song in the rural country of Wisconsin.

With the Midwest, there's a work ethic inside of me and most of the collaborative writers I work with. A lot of people I work with on almost a daily basis live in Chicago and are also from the Midwest, and I don't think that's by chance. We come from a like-minded place of creation. As a touring musician, I'm sensitive to my surroundings, and utilizing the resources that that provides. If you're in the same vicinity, you're going to have the same resources.

The concept of this record was trying to channel one moment in time. How did you attempt to do so?

The intention was to try and honor this moment that happened to me, because it was extremely profound and life-changing on the spectrum of having a body and being on earth. "Philo" is the third track on the album, and that was me trying to capture the feeling of this wave that fell down on me. I think I failed in that, and that's okay, as it's turned into something else. In hindsight, the album is pretty much a failure at trying to define something that is totally undefinable. It's interesting that it exists, and it's a journey, but instead of capturing that moment, it's more of the aftermath. Conceptually as an artist, I was trying to capture something that can't be captured.

There's this idea that great art doesn't always provide answers, that it's more about the journey.

That's an interesting part of art. I've always been interested in the dark corners or the empty space or wherever the mystery lies, because I think it's a dichotomy with music and film and anything, the way it's presented. That also lends itself to universal interpretation, the way empty space lets someone else use their imagination. That way it becomes a collaboration, too, unintentionally.

The album seems to deal with aspects of your own identity as an artist.

I can't help but think that it's this quintessential thing that probably happens to everyone in their life. I grapple with existential issues all the time. My mind can go into these dark spirals. It's the privilege of living the life of an artist. It's a struggle sometimes, but you live your life in a way that opens up the space to these larger questions. This album was more of an answer for myself to a lot of those kinds of questions, or perhaps a temporary answer. I'm always seeing myself as an outsider to my environment, which is totally false. I'm definitely taking part in something, but with this record especially, it was more of trying to examine the point of it all with a lens.

How do you know when a record's finished?

Sometimes I know, sometimes I don't. It depends artistically, or pragmatically, on the steps that I'm taking. "How am I creating this?" Sometimes I set parameters to cut myself off, and I find mixed results. For this album, specifically, I worked closely with Cooper Crain, who co-produced it. Most of the time, I wanted to go five steps further and he said, "No. This is it. It's done." I found myself trusting his judgment in that. In hindsight, I think it was important for this album. It would be totally different if I just kept digging and digging. A lot of times, I dig until it's totally decimated. Really, I've just turned something into nothing again. For this album, I utilized Cooper as kind of a guide. It was much more collaborative in that way, where he was like, "This is done." Or, "Let's push this further." He gave me that foresight.

You started out self-recording everything. So this is all new then?

Yeah, most of my stuff has been self-recorded, up until maybe last year, with [Jackie Lynn](#). I've worked closely with Cooper for almost 10 years now though, so there's a lot of ESP involved. It's good. When I'm writing, I throw myself into it and it can get pretty intoxicating, and you can get lost pretty quickly, so having those people help you along is vital.

Photo by Julia Dratel

Here are 5 secret self help actions:

Have selected text from women in the arts & follow their inspiration during times of self doubt. A few from the [Reaching For Indigo](#) chapter include: [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) by Rebecca Skloot, [Letter To My Daughter](#) by Maya Angelou, [The Year Of Magical Thinking](#) by Joan Didion, [I'll Never Write My Memoirs](#) by Grace Jones, [Styles of Radical Will](#) by Susan Sontag, Angry Women 1 & 2 (RE/search)

Go running / exercise while the moon is out.

Good morning! As soon as you wake up drink one huge glass of water & stretch for 30 minutes while listening to a new piece of music.

Cook something that you've never made before and share it with a friend. Apologize and laugh when it tastes awful.

Give yourself 1 sleep-day pass. You are allowed to exchange this for one day of sleeping. You are allowed to use this only once a year, on your hardest day of the year.

Name

Haley Fohr

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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