

On putting a finger on your feelings



Musicians Nora Cheng, Penelope Lowenstein, and Gigi Reece (Horsegirl) discuss embracing scrappiness, resisting the urge to compare themselves to their idols, and remembering their friendship amid success as a band.

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As told to Kali Flanagan, 2651 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Focus](#), [Beginnings](#), [Failure](#).

Let's begin with the obvious. How does a song start for you guys?

Penelope: I feel like it can start in several ways. Sometimes it comes out just playing around in Danbro [the band's Brooklyn rehearsal space] and then taking it from there. Other times Nora and I will bring in the beginning of something that we've already written. But even if we're bringing in a song we've written independently, it's with the understanding that it has to be completely exploded and reassembled. Everyone has to equally shape it in order for it to feel like it's become a full song.

There's a lot more space on this record, both sonically and in the songwriting. How did you arrive at this evolution of your sound? Did you foresee it happening?

Gigi: I mean, I feel like it wasn't "intentional." We knew we wanted clean guitar on this record. That was a major thing we wanted to play with in terms of new sounds on record. And then lyrically, I at least feel like there was a realization of, "Oh my god, when we are embracing minimalism, the vocals feel so much more intimate and it feels a lot more natural to write a personal song." Lyrics and vocal melodies took on a new quality on this record because of the space, and the arrangements that we were writing naturally encouraged us to do that with the vocals.

I remember reading something about you staying away from writing personal songs in the past. What do you think has led you to write more intimate songs?

Nora: Dude, your twenties.

Penelope: I was in high school when we were writing the first record. I didn't have love to write about at that time because I was a kid. It's just about experiencing shit and connecting with music. When I moved here, I began connecting with music lyrically in a way that I never did as a teenager. As a teenager, it was just about energy and noise. In college I was like, "It's so beautiful to hear Al Green sing about love and feel that that articulates how I feel."

Do you think that there's a change that has occurred in the songs parallel to the change of living in New York?

Gigi: They coincide because of the time we moved to New York in our lives. Anywhere we would've been from 18 to

22, we would've gone through these things. But there is a uniqueness to it because of the isolation and loneliness that comes with being in a huge city and not feeling like you are not completely on your feet.

You still have a community in Chicago, which I'm assuming was influential in the process of making the first record. Do you feel like you have a community in New York, and did that impact these new songs in their genesis?

Gigi: While we were writing these songs, I don't know if we felt we had it. But recently we have felt much more like we have community. In the first few years of living here, you're meeting so many people and you have no idea how to decipher what a person is in your life. So there's a bit of a distance from community in what we wrote.

As students and young people living in New York, how is your process integrated into your everyday life?

Penelope: Since starting college, songwriting has become a moment to pause and reflect. I often felt overwhelmed while writing this record, especially with writing personal lyrics and writing something that you feel suits the way you're feeling. It is a really rewarding relationship to form with your creative work, where you can help yourself feel seen through making something. You can put your finger on your own feelings.

It's not just one moment, but can you recall being able to recognize your creative priorities changing?

Gigi: It wasn't like we sat down and said, "It's time to switch things up, guys."

Nora: There were totally phases during the writing process. "Sport Meets Sound" was a moment where we kind of felt like we understood where we wanted to go. At some point when we were recording demos, we started using a bunch of percussion or a glockenspiel, and that was another solidification.

Gigi: Then we knew Cate [Le Bon] was going to do it.

Nora: And there's a point in the studio when you're listening back to what you've made...

Gigi: ...Realizing what your record sounds like.

Penelope: As you write and start to chip away at this thing, it feels disconnected for a long time and you have no idea how the pieces fit together. And then you start to reference yourself as you keep writing it and you're like, "I want to write something that sounds like this song on our own record." That's when the threads started to cross a little bit. I remember heading into the studio with Cate, feeling like I knew there was something cohesive, but it hadn't fully been stitched together. And we knew that the studio was a way that we wanted to do that, so we came in with these songs not completely finished.

Nora and Gigi: Which we've never done.

How much consideration did you put into live arrangements while writing this record, especially as a three-piece where functionality can either be a creative tool or a barrier?

Penelope: We always see the trio as a creative tool. Even in the songs that feel most exploded in the studio, there is still a trio at the core that can play these songs. And we realized that again recently, when we came back to try and figure out these live arrangements. It ended up naturally staying true, because it's so important to maintain the trio in every sense.

Gigi: These songs can exist in many different ways and still be songs. For example, [playing live] we're not having violins, but we'll still try to fill the space because these are the same songs.

You've spoken about your collaboration with Cate Le Bon as more open and conversational than former experiences. How did collaborating in this way challenge what you knew about your process?

Penelope: Once we had decided that we wanted to work with her, we knew we were signing ourselves up for a completely different experience because she wasn't the kind of producer you hire when you're like, "Okay, just press record and we'll do the rest." You don't bring her in for that. You bring her in to push you and to be another perspective on the thing—which we were excited about, but it also made us nervous. We had these songs that we knew could be exploded in the studio and really benefit from that, but we didn't know how to do it at all.

Gigi: It wasn't challenging in the way of being "super hard." It all felt very natural, but Cate was an outside force that we had never let in like that before. She instilled us with a certain level of confidence that we could not have gotten by ourselves. Specifically, adding synth on "[Julie](#)" is something that we would've probably been afraid of if there wasn't somebody we really respect and look up to saying, "No, this is the coolest choice you guys could make. And it sounds great."

Is there anything that she would say in the studio that stuck with you or anything she implored you to consider?

Penelope: Embracing the scrappiness.

Nora: Because we told her we were worried that this record would come across too clean cut, too polished.

Gigi: She expanded my mind at one point when I was stuck thinking, "Fuck, what would the Velvet Underground have done in this situation?" She was like, "Heroin. You cannot compare yourself to that because it's not you." From that moment, I dropped the idea that we need to be our influences, that we need to think about what our influences might do. We are ourselves *right now*, in the studio. That was a sentiment we kept throughout the process of the record: being more self-referential.

How have you dealt with being compared to other artists, especially ones that you look up to? How has that changed coming from a distinct DIY scene to now being an established act on a historic record label?

Gigi: It was my New Year's resolution to stop comparing myself to other people. At a point you really do have to shut it off. Because it's only going to fuel you in the directions that aren't true to you.

Penelope: I don't feel like I compare Horsegirl to other people because I love the two of them, and if they're on board with this, we feed off of each other's confidence. After so much time playing together, I'm just like, "We make what we make." I can't make something that someone else makes. This is genuine coming from us, and that is enough for me. Knowing your own lane a little bit and feeling okay with other people doing their own thing and you doing your own thing. That's how I feel coming up with [Lifeguard](#), admiring them so much but knowing I could never be in a band that sounds like them. But when other people compare us to other people, that gets hard for me, because you make your own thing and you think you're so in your own lane.

Gigi: It's always just other people making sense of it to themselves.

The band has such strong aesthetics both visually and sonically. How do you balance that with emotional catharsis in the process of making the record?

Gigi: The form is the content. The medium is the message.

Penelope: In embracing pop structure and songwriting on this record, there were moments where it took time to embrace the structure of a classic song, and not feeling how we did as teenagers. [As teenagers] we had this intuition to always be weird, always be weird, always be weird. On this record, we felt very confident about having an emotional song, just presenting it acoustically. That was a moment of being like, "These are the feelings of the song. We don't need to bury it in this avant-garde kind of thing." There are other songs where a cool arrangement reflects the emotions of the song, and there's balance in that, but it takes confidence to be critical.

What does the band's creative process look like on tour? Does it even exist?

Gigi: We definitely do not write songs when we're on tour. It comes from trying out songs, playing a song we wrote night after night after night. Through that, you realize there is something you may want to do differently. There are songs we have not toured on that we're going to be touring on, and I sense that we're going to have our own realizations through that in ways that are exciting.

Nora: When you're touring songs, you naturally fall into the way that you play them every night. You don't even realize that the part has changed, and then it comes time to record, and that is just the part.

Gigi: Watching the moments that people react to is really special because it's the type of stuff you just don't picture at all when you're writing... And with putting so much space in our songs, that is something you must endure as an audience. It's really scary to not fill up all the space. But now we have people [who] will come to our shows and listen attentively, hopefully to the songs we write that have all this quietness in it.

Speaking of quietness, how do you all deal with dry spells?

Nora: "Dry" has a bad connotation, but the pause that occurred when we weren't writing stuff all the time led us to our second record's sound. If we just started writing right after writing *Versions of Modern Performance*, it wouldn't have felt so much like it's a new thing and wouldn't have felt as... conclusive.

Penelope: When we weren't writing, I'd forget that we were in a band a little bit, and just feel like I'm with my bros. We were able to discover the band anew after some time and think, "What does it even sound like when we play together?" It felt different because we had gone through all this change together, but we were closer than ever as friends. Preserving that joy is important. So, if you can approach the dry spell like that, instead of just frustration, frustration, frustration, then you can come out with something new when you rediscover your craft.

When it comes to creative decisions as a band, do you see yourselves as a unit or as three individuals? How do you work through conflict within that?

Gigi: When we were making our first record, I felt inseparable from Penelope and Nora. What we thought, what we were listening to, as a unit. Even the way we dressed used to be a lot more similar to each other. In these past few years, music aside, we have all come into ourselves both on our own and with each other.

Penelope: As we get older, we have to accept the fact that we are three individuals, working together on something that will always be insanely collective because we grew up together and discovered our connection to music together... That's what it feels like with Nora and I bringing personal lyrics to the table. It's like, "I'm asking you guys to play this thing with me that is about my life"—to write a song together that reflects this experience that we've been seeing each other through.

Gigi: Speaking as the non-lyric writer, even if a song is about something that Nora went through or something Penelope went through, I was there.

Lastly, how have you experienced failure and how do you define it?

Gigi: Maybe we've had periods of failing ourselves in terms of getting too wrapped up in it, in a way of reading comments, trying to see everything that's online about ourselves. This time we've been adamant about not reading press, for the sanity of each other and preservation of our friendship.

Penelope: It's an evolving relationship for all of us, ahead of this next tour. We will have never played these songs before and now we're going to be on a huge stage. It's really hard to feel like you fucked up something like that... But I don't know if I would call that a failure, it's just the reality of being a musician.

Gigi: Also, the reality of being split between two things cultivates a relationship with failure, in terms of not being able to give myself completely to the band because I am going to school, or not being able to be completely invested in school because I have the band.

Penelope: It can be hard to cut yourself a break because we really, really care about this band with every ounce of our beings. The way I try to ease myself is by reminding myself that I'm in it for the long haul and every little mistake can't feel like the end of the world, otherwise this is not sustainable. Acknowledging that it's important to care, but it's not going to go perfectly all the time... It's just going to be a long life.

Nora: Progress is not linear.

Penelope: Nora always says that at the best time to me.

Horsegirl recommends:

Spending time by yourself

Guinness on draft, opaque with froth

Tambourine

The TV show Hacks

Cooking with your friends

Name

Horsegirl

Vocation

musicians

□

Chase Middleton