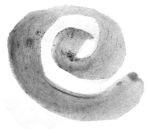
Jana Hunter on figuring yourself out



November 22, 2016 - Baltimore-based musician Jana Hunter has been releasing music under her own name since the mid-2000s. Her band, Lower Dens, have released three full-length albums the latest of which, 2015's *Escape From Evil*, combines the slippery aesthetic of 80's pop music with songs dealing with gender fluidity and personal liberation. In 2015 Hunter wrote an essay for *Cosmopolitan Magazine* titled "What It's Like to Be a Female Musician When You Don't Identify as a Woman" in which she discusses her own gender fluidity and describes her experiences as a working musician.

"Over the years, you get a creeping sensation—which eventually develops into a queasy feeling and then a simmering rage—that no, you're not crazy," she writes. "Things really are harder and more repulsive than they should be, and yes, if people thought of you as man, it would be easier and you would probably be making at least some money."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3099 words.

Tags: Music, Culture, Identity.

Are you the kind of musician that prefers being in the studio as opposed to being on stage in front of people?

It definitely came much more naturally to me. I'm not sure why that is, but I love the process of recording and making a song come alive and be as dynamic and multidimensional as possible. That's my favorite part by far, of all the things that I do. In the last couple of years I've worked a lot on overcoming some difficulties that I've had with the stage and I find it much more rewarding now—and probably ultimately a better use of time in terms of being a citizen of the world and performing. I think that it was something that I was always really afraid of. I love being in the studio though. It's my favorite thing.

Everybody that's in a band generally has to do interviews and go on tour and get used to the idea that people are looking at you, talking to you, talking about you. How has that experience changed for you? Do you feel more comfortable now than you did back when you first started?

Yes, definitely. I was painfully, terribly, awfully shy growing up and that didn't really change in the first few years that I was playing music. Oh God, I just hated it. I really had a difficult time going out and performing, and it mostly had to do with being exposed to people and having to talk to people after shows… it was so awful. I hated it. I feel like one of the things that I have worked really hard at the whole time that I've been in Lower Dens involves learning how to be an active member of my community, of society. How to drop the insecurities and just be with people in the truest, most full sense. I also think about the responsibilities of a performer now and the actual function of a performer. I think about what possibilities are developed by becoming someone who gets up on stage and actively reaches out for people and tries to draw them into something other than whatever their lives are engulfed in.

I recently re-read the piece that you wrote for *Cosmopolitan* last year. It's certainly one thing to be a woman working in the music industry, but when you don't present yourself in the typical way—or when you don't conform to the expected gender binary—it becomes infinitely more complicated. I found the piece really fascinating. Did you get a strong reaction from that?

I guess maybe but it also was right around the same time—not too long afterwards, I think—when I wrote an op-ed for *Pitchfork* that had considerably more response, so in my memory whatever response that I had to the *Cosmo*

thing was dwarfed by the other. There was a response though, but I don't know what I was expecting. I think I tend to avoid having expectations, but what I was hoping was that writing that would make some of those states of mind that people who do easily fit into heteronormative society tend to have… well, to make it a little bit easier for them to understand that I and people like me are not that much different from them. That we are just people who live in a slightly different way but we are all the same.

One of the things that I have worked really hard at the whole time that I've been in Lower Dens involves learning how to be an active member of my community, of society.

I have this deep belief that the way that you relieve society of some of its prejudices is simply one person at a time. You get them in an article or you get them in a conversation or something like that. I was just hoping that maybe some people that aren't going to have this conversation otherwise in their day to day lives would read the article and maybe have their way of thinking changed a little bit.

You've become much more performative—both onstage and in your videos. What do you think a younger version of yourself would think seeing your current work? Did you ever imagine that you'd be comfortable enough to, say, make a video like "Real Thing"?

[laughs] No, but if I had thought about it I would be very, very startled. I know that when I was a kid I wanted to have that ability, but I didn't imagine that it really was something you could teach yourself to do.

How do you teach yourself? And do you think that this sort of personal transformation was pushed forward by the fact that you were in a band and had to be in front of people?

For sure. I think that if you're lucky enough you figure out some sort of basics about how you function and what motivates you, then you can figure out, based on that, some sort of a method. For me I know about myself that if I can dig in and find a strong belief in something, then I can motivate myself to do almost anything on the back of that belief.

Prior to that I had a very hard time getting myself to do anything. Say, if I told myself that, "If you became a better performer, you could make a lot more money…" Then I would find it entirely impossible to become a better performer. But when I thought about how by being a better performer you could give people something in their lives that had substantial meaning to them that they maybe weren't getting otherwise, then I started working really hard at it. Working really hard at it just means having that intention and trying to reach people in that way. But it's hard if you're a natural born hermit—an extreme introvert—then it's fucking hard work.

Is songwriting a means of working things out? Do you think of it as a way of figuring out the world?

I think of that as everything that everybody does. What else are we going to do? Everything we do—whether we know it or not—is a way of figuring out the world. Definitely. A big difference to me, or the main difference to me between what type of music that I made when I was younger—like when I made *There's No Home*—and the music that I make now has to do with the intention. Early on, towards the end of that era of my solo records, the music was very intentionally a way of trying to deal with personal issues and family relationships and personal histories. My own very small world and individual sphere. Lower Dens has been much more about trying to think about myself and the larger world context that I'm in.

Do you find it's more comfortable working in the context of a band rather than releasing solo records under your own name?

Yes and no. In some ways it is easier in the band. More comfortable. You can tell that people get more excited for a band than they do a songwriter. I don't understand that. I just know it to be true. If they see a person's

name on a bill there's a lot of people that expect it to be boring singer-songwriter stuff. If they see a band name they react differently. The expectation is different. Making music with a band feels different in part because I know it's going to, even on a very surface level, be received differently by people—so I can try to accomplish different things with it.

I know about myself that if I can dig in and find a strong belief in something, then I can motivate myself to do almost anything on the back of that belief.

The other thing is, when I wrote songs by myself for me to also play by myself, those songs come out very quickly. They were very easy to write, especially compared to Lower Dens songs, and they didn't require a lot of complexity also because I was literally for the most part only ever going to be playing them as a solo musician. Lower Dens was more difficult because part of the necessary part of being in this band, for me, is having at least some parts of the process be collaborative, because I think if I write everything… I've been doing this for long enough to know that I'd just get bored with the sound of my own writing voice. I think things are more interesting when people work together. It's definitely harder to write collaboratively, but it's more rewarding.

To be making songs in what is such a politically and culturally tumultuous time feels complicated. Do you find that all of this stuff is creeping into the work that you're making?

I really think that it's unavoidable. Maybe if you're making songs for pure profit motive it doesn't, but otherwise it does. I was really young in the Reagan era, but as an adult living in America right now, I feel like Trump is a very similar character. I feel like he's Reagan without any dignity, and I feel like people are going to feel compelled to make music about what's happening right now and about police executions and extreme violent racism and this sort of thing. How can you not? How can you be a thinking, feeling human and not? I think if you're at all aware of what's going on, it's unavoidable that this will make its way into your art.

Jana Hunter recommends:

"This is harder than I thought. 5, right?

I keep thinking about specific cultural touchstones that made me a person who felt like I could see today's events coming millions of miles away, but then I think that's tied up entirely with an ego-driven desire to justify spouting words at people as if I know any better than anybody else what should be done or who needs to do it.

Also, is it really gonna do anybody any good at this point to see Trump as David Foster Wallace's Johnny Gentle? Or to understand how TV culture fattened us up in exactly the right way for these fucking political gluttons (In the Context of No Context)?

I'll admit I'm having a hard time even putting a record on. I don't want to be comforted. I don't wanna take a break. I wanna be all raging spitfire from dawn to dusk, focused like a laser. If only I had it in me. If I only knew where to direct it besides calls to Congress. People need to get it together… and to get together.

1. Julius Eastman - *Unjust Malaise*
2. Hannah Arendt - *The Human Condition*
3. James Baldwin - *Collected Essays*
4. This post by Lazenby
5. live for others get off the internet go out into the world and live for others"

I try to write songs that have an appeal that's a little bit broader than just what's happening in culture right

now… or that deal with subject matter that is a little bit more broad than just commenting on timely events. I think no matter what you're doing it's going to be influenced by the time that you're in. Especially when the time you're in is so terrifying.

Do you find that there's an artistic community there in Baltimore that's nourishing for you?

I find that the city itself in some ways encourages that. I moved here in part because I already knew several musicians living here who I'd met on tour while rolling through town. I still feel dumb trying to describe Baltimore to people after all these years. But there's something about it it feels very alive. Maybe part of it is because Baltimore is so poor that it's less overrun by that really thick surface layer of capitalism that you feel in other cities.

When I thought about how by being a better performer you could give people something in their lives that had substantial meaning to them that they maybe weren't getting otherwise, then I started working really hard at it.

Because it's poor it's really cheap for artists to live here and make work. It allows you to have a certain amount of freedom. A lot of people in the creative community aren't from here. We all moved here. That being said, I do know a lot of people who are from Baltimore who've stayed, who make art here… but a lot of us are transplants.

Are you asked for advice a lot? You seem like someone who has got a lot of stuff figured out.

I don't know about that…but yeah. People ask me advice sometimes and mostly it has to do with the music industry. How do I make a career out of this? How do I navigate this issue with management or my label? It's rarely a creative question. I do get a lot of people asking about collaborating on something, which I don't do too much. I feel like I'm not involved enough in my own work too much of the time, so I don't do that nearly as much collaborating as I used to. Nobody ever writes me to ask….well, I guess that's not true. Young'uns have often written me and asked if I will take a listen to their songs and let them know what I think. I don't mind that at all.

If you had not been a songwriter or been a musician, what would you have done? Did you always know this was what you would do?

No. The first time I remember wanting to do this was when I was about 10 or 11 years old and I had this Tiffany tape that I loved singing along to. I imagined myself on stage as Tiffany. When I was in high school I really thought I was going to be a political journalist, but then I ended up not going to college, and found myself in my early twenties really only knowing how to do one thing–make music. That's more or less how this happened.

It doesn't surprise me that you'd want to have been a political journalist. In fact, I was just watching a video of you on CNN–from 2015, I think–talking about politics? Do you still have an interest in that world?

I do, but I guess I feel real pessimism when it comes to the efficacy of the institutions that we've had in place for hundreds of years now. So while I feel optimism for humanity, I feel extreme pessimism for institutions and it's harder for me sometimes to pay attention to the details. Although I'm constantly reminded by friends of why that is a bad thing—that regardless of how I perceive those institutions, it's important to know how the decisions that those people are making are going to affect me and the people around me and the people that I love. It's important to know what they're doing and why they're doing it, even when that knowledge is, you know, deeply unpleasant.

Yeah, I understand why people crave escapism. The need to escape, even if it's just for two hours, to not think,

to not be talked to, not being asked anything. Technology makes it so hard to get away from that stuff.

It does. I feel like that's a really important point, because that's a key way of relating to different extremes of people. I think of the people who have built a way of life around that—escapism. Never confronting the true reality of anything. A lot of times when I think of conservatives, that's how I think of them. Escapists for life. They have built a whole ideology that allows them to believe that having a nuclear white family and a decent income is life itself. To me that's just as limiting and absurd as if you were never to stop playing video games.

If you're gonna make art—or if you just want to be a functioning person out in the world—you need to understand yourself.

Then on the other hand I totally identify with what you're saying about the psychic exhaustion, but then I imagine the level of psychic exhaustion you have if you are hated for the color of your skin and have to deal with that every fucking day of your life since you were first made aware of it. I can never begin to imagine how fucking traumatizing that must be, or how exhausting.

It's amazing to me how many people in the world are seemingly incapable of looking at anything from anyone else's point of view.

I grew up in a very conservative place. Because of that, I feel like I understand those people—these extreme conservatives—and it's hard for me to blame them for wanting to create this false idea of the world that allows them to have what they consider a more peaceful life. But I wouldn't want to live that way. I wouldn't want to live trapped in that absurd, fearful, awful reality.

A lot of queer people grow up asking, "Why me?"—and I certainly felt that when I was younger, but now I'm grateful because it was that aspect of myself that really drove my intellectual curiosity—it caused me to seek out answers, to seek out certain kinds of books and art. My mind was opened as a result of having to come to terms with my own identity.

If you're gonna make art—or if you just want to be a functioning person out in the world—you need to understand yourself. It's just that if you are a queer or trans person living in America, you are kind of forced to confront your true identity. When you are surrounded by people who don't understand you, it has this weird way of forcing you to really understand yourself.

Name
Jana Hunter

Vocation
Musician, Writer, Keen Observer

Fact

Baltimore-based musician Jana Hunter has been releasing music under her own name since the mid-2000s. Her band, Lower Dens, have released three full-length albums the latest of which, 2015's *Escape From Evil*, combines the slippery aesthetic of 80's pop music with songs dealing with gender fluidity and personal liberation. In 2015 Hunter wrote an essay for *Cosmopolitan Magazine* titled "What It's Like to Be a Female Musician When You Don't Identify as a Woman" in which she discusses her own gender fluidity and describes her experiences as a working musician.

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