Julien Baker on learning to articulate joy

February 3, 2017 - Julien Baker is a 21-year old musician from Memphis, Tennessee. She released her first solo album, *Sprained Ankle*, in 2015 to widespread critical acclaim. She is currently working on a new record to be released later this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3114 words.

Tags: Music, Anxiety, Inspiration.

Are you working on a record now? What's happening?

I am, but I'm always working on songs no matter what. You can't not be working on a project if writing is how you go about compartmentalizing your life. Everything that happens, every feeling that you have, becomes work. Since the end of 2015—and keeping in mind all the life changes that year occasioned—I was writing quite a bit. I saw a latent theme start to develop, and then I was like, "Oh, well let's pursue this." I now have a really good idea of what I want the next record to be conceptually. I think I can be more intentional with it in presentation, if not necessarily in construction. It'll probably be sonically similar, because that's the style in which I write.

The stillness of songwriting—knowing when to stop and just be still—is often the most difficult part of songwriting for me. Knowing when it's enough. Sometimes I think, "Wow, wouldn't it be cool if we had, like, a full string quartet and a horn section here, making this into an opera?" but then that doesn't serve the song. You know? Lyrically, I think, it's better to be thoughtful instead of just vomiting it out.

I'm about to do something dorky, so I apologize. One of my favorite quotes about creativity is from Wordsworth who says something like, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of emotions reflected upon in tranquility." I think that really accurately represents the dichotomy of writing songs for me, especially with my particular writing style. It's like, "All right, I have an emotion." I'll then go out to my garage and vomit out a song that's essentially just me singing my feelings out loud. This time around I'm doing a lot more refining. *Sprained Ankle* was really, really raw. Which isn't to say that's always a bad thing—it suited that record and those songs—but this time around I'm happy to have more time with it.

That record seemed to come out of the blue and catch people by surprise. How does it feel to be making music with the knowledge that there is an audience now that is anticipating it? Does that change things?

I've heard myself say something in the past that isn't totally precise, suggesting that I made *Sprained Ankle* only for me. Admittedly, it's a very self-involved record that's specific to my own experiences that I wrote as a tool, as a coping mechanism primarily, for what was happening in my life at that point. That's how I've always used music. I grew up writing songs in punk bands and we would have the same conversation regularly, "Oh, this is going to be rad when we play it at a show!" You would imagine people singing along and yelling out the chorus. So you have something that you're not only trying to say for yourself because you need to say it, but also that you're saying to the world, even if the world in your schema is this small community… even if your audience is just a basement.

Now that I know the audience is a bit broader, I can't help but think about that sometimes. Still, the best songs are the ones I just let happen. What is that Rilke quote? That he's not a creator of art, he's just a midwife to it? That's how I like to feel. How I approach making songs isn't totally different. Often it's just when something difficult happens to me or I'm stressed out, I'll just sit down and say whatever my fears are. I've been perpetually trying to come to terms with doing *Sprained Ankle* live for a year, because I've moved on from those specific experiences. The emotions, maybe, are evergreen in a sense because you're always going to have fresh heartbreak at some point in your life. You're going to have self-doubt, but it feels weird to still be singing about them years after the fact. One of the challenges about playing live has been finding new ways to apply old sentiments.

I always talk about the song "Good News." I started to get really bothered that I was having conversations with people who listen to my music who said, "That song made me feel better!" but then I'm sitting up there screaming, "I ruin everything I do." That's not the kind of self-deprecating rhetoric or mentality that I want to promote. However, it's also false to pretend like no one ever has these feelings, because people have those feelings all the time and that's a very real thing. There's a balance of not having an artifice of hope, but still writing songs that are honest about how I feel inside, which isn't always great. I finally made a sort of concession with myself about it, so now before I play that song I'll say, "This song is about when I thought I ruined everything, and now I'm trying to learn that that's not true."

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It is cheesy and nine times out of ten I wince at myself on stage when I do it, but it's like I *have* to do it in order to prove that it's true, that I mean it. So, with these new songs —particularly the ones that were written about a relationship ending a year ago and I wrote over a year ago—I had to think about what it will mean to play them live and how that might feel. They are thematically appropriate for the record, which will be released in 2017, and obviously I've moved on and that's an amicable situation right now, but it's still a funny thing. I think I've been exploring the stigmatization around mental health and being open and honest about feelings, because that's basically been my job. Everybody in this music scene is a little bit, I don't want say "messed up" because that implies there's something wrong with you, but we all feel a little messed up and maybe that's why we do art.

I recently read this Alain de Botton book and it changed my life. He said that "Art is there for you when love stops being there for you." I was like, "Oh my gosh, true." Yeah, so being honest about those really dark things, like saying, "I feel disappointing, I feel like I'm nothing," is important. I think about that when I start to censor myself. That was why I ended up leaving "Rejoice" on my previous record. Sometimes you need to inhabit an idea or a feeling in order to transcend it. The thing that you're most afraid is the very thing you have to be bravest about divulging.

It seems like a more more popular human compulsion, particularly among songwriters, to document our own darkness than it is to articulate happiness. As someone who is known for writing beautifully sad songs, what do you make of that?

I remember a comment someone made about Ben Gibbard from Death Cab for Cutie: "Oh, he got happier and stopped writing good songs." I was like, "What a grotesque thing to say." How awful is it that our culture is geared in such a way. I think there's inherent worth in all art and I never criticize the formal quality of art as long as there is genuine emotion there, but we'll tolerate all kinds of cheesy heartbreak-related art just because of the subject matter. It's much more difficult to pull off a joyful song. I'm always afraid that the public will scorn songs about happiness out of a disbelief that it is genuine. I'm interested in talking about joy, but it's difficult and you don't want to be clumsy with it. I think of it more as, "I have joy." That's a really complex thing to unpack. But I think articulating joy is important. I'm thinking of songs by people like the B-52s. There is this Australian artist called Alex Lahey who was a song where the chorus is just, "Let's go out and have fun tonight." It's almost like you can hear the tongue-in-cheek irony of there's mundanity in the grind of life and then this person is writing a song that's just parodying a go-out-party song. It's really cool.

It's like it's somehow less embarrassing to have an emotional meltdown in public than it is to be really honest about your happiness in a non-ironic way.

I think what's so crazy is that for so many people I know—myself included—it's this thing of when you're acutely aware of the suffering of everything around you, it seems like happiness is a lack of decorum. Does that make sense?

For me, 2016 was a lot about learning, both good things and bad. I'm learning a lot about joy—joy as something different from happiness. Because happiness is a temporary space, an emotion, but joy, I think, is something different. It's like a disposition that you choose to adopt. It's all right to allow yourself that. I read a lot of philosophy, so I'm always thinking things like, "I want to be the platonic ideal of a human and do what is ethically asked of me by my existence." Maybe that means not only writing sad songs. Maybe that means expressing joy. I'm still learning how to do that.

We went on a tour and I was reading *Ethics* by Bonhoeffer because I am a huge nerd and I was just like, "I'll never be a good person." Then one of my good friends was like, "Do you

think God hates joy?" I was like, "No I don't, I don't think God hates joy." She said, "So, if you have everything to be happy about, why won't you display that as an image of hope instead of a depiction of suffering, because you can't get on stage and talk about hope if you have no hope. You can't go on stage and talk about joy as a destination—not just an unachievable goal—if you have no joy, so let yourself have joy." You know how sometimes people say a simple explanation to you for something and you feel like a total idiot? I was just like, "I guess you're right."

It's all such a fifth grade classroom poster—*Just Do Your Best!*—but that's truly the best and most profound advice.

I still struggle with anxiety. For the longest time on tour I would have panic attacks before almost every show. Performing is scary, and there's a lot going on in there—"in there" being my brain. So while we were on tour in Australia it felt like I was always waiting for another shoe to drop, and when it didn't I felt like I could just cherish the fact that I'm legitimately enjoying what is happening in my life and I'm excited to talk to people.

I can be a positive force. I can interact with people and I don't look like a brooding crazy person. I'm smiling, I'm happy, and I'm getting to hug them. There was one show in particular where I was starting a song that there was a girl in the front of the stage who yelled out, "This is my song!" I thought it was funny because I'd only ever heard someone say that when they were at a bar and a song came on the jukebox, but I loved that she said that. I had this really cheesy thought like, "You know what? It is." It's not mine anymore. I was like, "It is your song, girl. This is for you. I hope you enjoy it." She was stoked. Instead of feeling guilty that people like my music or feeling like I don't deserve it or I haven't earned it, I'm just happy that my job is that I stand on a stage and I look out on a whole bunch of eyeballs and we get to share this thing.

After the whirlwind success of *Sprained Ankle*, was it weird to finally be home again and working on music?

My biggest fear is that anyone thinks that I'm anything other than amazed and grateful that I get to be a musician. Like, every day I wake up astonished by that. I think generally the amount of reward you get in your occupation mirrors the amount of sacrifice it requires. I needed to take some time to not be a ghost in my real life, to see my family and visit my partner, and just be radio silent for a while.

I write a lot on tour, which is weird because I used to think I couldn't get into the right head space on tour to write songs, but then eventually touring just becomes your norm and I *really* have to be writing, so you just adapt. I'll make little voice memos in the car and listen to them and write lyrics while I'm walking around. Once I got back home I rented this studio space and did a whole bunch of demos. We spent almost 12 hours in the studio every day. Hearing the demos outside of my head was really good for me. I'd been worrying myself by thinking, what if the new songs are too different? What if they are too much the same? What if everyone is disappointed? I felt the weight of expectation start to make me afraid that I couldn't do it. I was, "It's all going to be crap, everyone's going to hate it." Then once I got into the recording process things changed.

I was recording with my friend Calvin Lauber, who is in a band from Memphis called Pillow Talk. He's in the scene and I've known him since I was 13 years old, and he happens to do recording and engineering as well as just play around in bands. It felt just so comfortable that I lost track of the hours and it was kind of like one of those moments, "Oh yeah, I love just the process of making art and I could stay here for another 12 hours just experimenting and, like, shaping this thing." It brought me back to the reason why I ever did this in the first place. You have to be able to reconnect to the joy of making the thing that you make. It's easy to get distracted from that.

I think merely by existing and refusing to give in to the persona of brooding tortured artist, you prove the point of you do not have to be sad all the time. You do not have to be defined by your sadness.

I was so grateful that I felt comfortable enough to come back and make my music in Memphis. I moved back here at the beginning of the year to be closer to my family. I love my city. I have, like, Drake levels of love for my city. It felt good to be here. Once the demos were done and I was listening back to some of it, I had this weird feeling. I'm hyper-critical of my own work, which most artists probably are, but I had the strange sensation of thinking,"This is how it feels to be proud of something that I made." I realized that as long as I am proud and I feel like I say what I want to with the narrative of this record, I am able to separate myself from being so concerned with, "What if people hate it?" Even if they hate it, I'll still know that I've done my best. It's all such a fifth grade classroom poster—*Just Do Your Best!*—but that's truly the best and most profound advice.

Given the nature of your music, do people project a kind of "tortured artist" thing onto you? And how do you circumvent that?

When I'm on stage I try to think about things before I just rush in and say something silly… but I'm also quite silly. That being said, I'm not a Lorde or a Taylor Swift. I'm not someone who is playing stadiums and who has all these eyeballs on them. I don't think I'm expected to be a role model. I'm not at that level. Still, people often take the slices of life represented in the songs and expand that to represent my total personhood. I think another task of mine is unifying Julien of life with Julien of the record, which often entails saying dorky, cheesy, positive things and making bad jokes on stage. Sometimes it goes over well, sometimes it's like crickets in the audience and people are like, "What's going on? This is too much of an emotional pendulum!" and they look freaked out. Then I just play my songs instead of making more lame jokes. I think merely by existing and refusing to give in to the persona of brooding tortured artist, you prove the point of you do not have to be sad all the time. You do not have to be defined by your sadness. I think about these things when I write songs and when I play live shows. I am trying to break the spell, in some way, that when you see someone up on stage singing sad songs that there is more to them than that. Sometimes you can't help but be perceived as a kind of persona, but why not be a persona that's actually realistic? I'd rather do that, instead of just posing over here in the window sill with my copy of Rilke and looking really bummed out. That isn't me.

Recommended by Julien Baker:

Things that are inspiring to me right now…

-The novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson (a recommendation from the ever-wise Lucy Dacus)

-The poetry of Beyza Ozer, a poet recommended by Morgan Martinez, editor of Hooligan Mag (an inspiring person in her own right)

-The art of Kazuo Shiraga

-The bands PWR BTTM and Camp Cope; their music, their social commentary, their unapologetic commitment to change through art, honestly just them as people, all of it

-The paintings and zines of Ariel Baldwin, great pal/Memphis-native/Chicago-resident, makes some really provocative and powerful art about healing.

Name
Julien Baker

Vocation
Musician, Songwriter

Fact

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Jake Cunningham