

Karen Elson on being a professional multihyphenate



May 3, 2017 - Karen Elson is a musician and model. Her second solo album, *Double Roses*, was released this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2135 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Fashion](#), [Anxiety](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

You're person with a kind of double life—a true creative multihyphenate. One might imagine that being a fashion model might have little bearing on what it means to make songs and perform them, but do you find that these two careers relate to each other in any way?

The multihyphenate. The dreaded multihyphenate. It can be such a tricky thing to get past. I think about someone like Sam Shepard, who my record is actually named after; he's a multihyphenate. I don't see anyone judging Sam Shepard for being an actor-director-playwright at all.

I personally find it very interesting, the idea of doing a number of things. Because it's all perception at the end of the day. How other people perceive you; how you perceive who you are. For me, it's just showing another side of the coin. Yes, I look a certain way; I get my picture taken; I am in magazines. It's fun sometimes and sometimes it's strange, but it's given me a lot of freedom—be it financial freedom, be it the ability for me to take six years to make a record because modeling was paying the rent. The freedom to be discerning. So in so many ways, the two things work well for me, but this is just my life, you know? I can't speak for anybody else's experience and I can't control the way other people choose to perceive me.

Given that you're a successful model, did you find that people had a hard time accepting you in this other role as a musician? Or that you had to try extra hard to prove yourself?

The first time I put out a record I was really concerned about proving myself to people. This time around there were many times where, well... I didn't have a record label, I didn't have a producer for the record, and I didn't have a manager. What other people thought or public opinion didn't really matter to me at all because I just needed to make a record. It was really about the need to make something. I worked so hard just to get my voice heard that at this point I'm like, "If you like it great, if you don't it's all right too."

People often have a dim view of anyone crossing over from fashion into another creative field. In some ways, fashion is a really maligned art form... usually by those who've never worked in it or have no understanding of it.

Yeah, I think they think it's vapid, and I see why, but most of the people I know in fashion are really fascinating, interesting, deeply creative people. Then you've got the other side, as with any business, where there are people who give it a bad name. Fashion is also largely based on beauty, which is admittedly a strange thing. It's a really weird reality to have your worth based on how you appear. It's not normal, and I understand that. I think that you have to understand that. Simply by being in the business, I've had to be really unattached to the way I look. I look in the mirror and I'm like, well that's me... but it's not all of me. That's not the biggest, most important side of me. There's plenty of things that make up a person. I have to believe that if I can understand that my own worth is not defined by my appearance, that other people will be able to understand that too, that they will be able to appreciate other aspects of my identity.

You released your first album, *The Ghost Who Walks*, in 2010, which took a lot of people by surprise. Are you always working on music?

Always. I'm always working on music. I never stopped. Writing songs is something I've doing since I was in my teens. It's always been like my bedside companion, you know? It's just a constant in my life, be it for public consumption or just my own emotional release, it's been there. I have actually been writing songs for as long as I can remember, I'm just very choosy about the ones I actually share.

As far as like my process is concerned, I was just explaining this to someone recently. It's a very therapeutic thing. If something's bothering you in life, under your skin, or haunting you and you can't find the right words to explain it—a song can do that for you. There's something about music and lyrics that creates this gorgeous poetic language where you don't have to write things down: today *this* happened, yesterday *this* happened, and it made me feel *this* way. It's very free. Writing songs, playing guitar... it takes the tension away. That's always what music has been to me, even as a listener. I find release in it.

I read a quote where you said that as a kid you'd write songs and keep them a secret, which is relatable. It's a big leap to go from doing something creatively in private to suddenly putting it out in the world.

I keep a lot of things secret. I've got a LOT of songs that I tend to keep secret. I'm a strange bird in that regard, you know? Maybe it's because I had success as a model and I have the luxury, so to speak, of keeping certain things close to my chest. I'm a perfectionist as well. I want to put good things out into the world. If there's something that feels unformed, unfinished, undone, then maybe the world doesn't need it. Part of the reason I enjoy working with different producers is because it helps you get over this. They kind of push you off the cliff a little bit more. Producers are almost like a spirit guide; they're helping force this being into life, helping guide you through the process.

Also, contrary to our world these days where we live in the moment and every experience is posted on social media, I like that my creative world is very private. I choose if and when I'll show that side of myself. It's strange. It's not even a conscious thing, it's just that's the way it is.

When so much of your professional life is about being seen, actually physically seen, by other people, the notion of having something that's just for you, some private creative world, must feel both healthy and kind of necessary.

I think so. Maybe that's a big part of why sometimes with music I'm a little shy. I mean, these days I'm a lot less secretive about my music. I'm ready to be out there with my music, big time. It is a relief these days to just be a bit more open about it but, again, that doesn't mean you have to put every single thing out there. I think it's wise to be thoughtful, to edit what you do, to put out the stuff that feels concise and clear. For this record we recorded 23 songs, but only 10 are on the record. I have these other 13 songs to save for a rainy day and maybe a few will get out into the world, maybe some things will be on another record further down the line, maybe I will just keep them for myself. At the end of the day, the goal is for the heart to be moved. Then move on.

Your work as a model necessitates a lot of travel. Are you able to work on music wherever you are? Or is that something you tend to do when you are home?

There are two rooms in my house that I usually write in. In my office and in the living room, that I'm sitting in right now. It's got these emerald green chairs; I sort of spin around obsessively in them while I write. It's usually when the kids are at school. So my writing time, when I seem to be the most productive, is from eight in the morning through two in the afternoon, when I go get my kids from school. Then it's not until bedtime that I have a minute to write again. But then I'm always thinking of the clock... like if I stay awake past midnight, I still have to be up at six. But whatever the circumstances are, wherever I am, I make it work. I carve my time. I need to carve my time. I've made an effort to have structure in that regard.

There is sometimes this idea that, if you are already successful at one thing, why do you need to do something else? People can easily disregard the fact that all people, even successful ones, are still human beings with creative impulses, eager to try new things.

Well, of course. Anybody who's trying to push the envelope a little and put themselves out on a limb to try something new... well, you're gonna get criticism. Trust me, I mean I'm sure there are a bunch of people who think my music's crap. You can't let it cripple you because if you do, you're believing them. If you are making things solely for validation, it's not gonna be easy for you. Again, I use someone like Sam Shepard as an example. Look how many things he does. Why can't I do other things? Why can't I at least try, you know?

The story of your modeling career is fairly well known—discovered at the age of 16, shot by Steven Meisel for the cover of *Vogue* on your 18th birthday—but had that career not happened for some reason, do you think you would have been a musician regardless?

To be honest, I can never answer the question—the “what if”—because the only life I know is this life I’m living. Who knows? I have no idea where I’d be. No idea. I’d like to say music would be part of the equation, but I find it hard to speculate. It’s a difficult question to answer because I’m only living this reality, not another. I think it’s more important to think about what you are doing right now.

Has pursuing a life in music, in addition to your career as a model, been a radical exercise in multi-tasking?

It’s crazy right now. It’s nuts. My life is nuts right now. In a good way though. There’s a lot of music happening. Lots and lots and lots of music. Rather than be stressed out by it, I’m just grateful that I get to do it. Honestly, I enjoy every single day of playing music. Also, it’s a lot more work than modeling. I’ll say that much—a lot more. I’m playing with a band and figuring out that actually I am the boss. I am coordinating, organizing, planning. I’m making my own music, directing my own music videos, running this ship and trying to sail it towards friendly waters, so to speak. And I’m still modeling intermittently when I can make it work. It’s challenging juggling so many things, as well as being a mother. But at the same time, it’s so deeply fulfilling that it’s worth the work. As a woman I think we’re naturally excellent multi-taskers and my god am I learning how to juggle and fit many things into the day, much to the detriment of my personal life. But that can take a hit right now. No time for sunshine. I’ll be fine.

Karen Elson recommends:

I love reading autobiographies because I love to read about other creative people’s lives. Somehow by knowing their story, you’re suddenly not alone in your own story. You’re not alone in dealing with the trials and tribulations of what it means to be a creative individual. It helps you understand that by being both blessed and cursed with a curious mind usually means that a normal life is never satisfactory. You know you have to make your life a force. And with that comes, at times, beauty and chaos. So I love to read an autobiography because of people I admire because I find them to be so insightful even to my own process. That’s definitely a big relief for me, currently.

I just read an amazing book about Sally Mann, the incredible photographer, she wrote an [autobiography](#) that is brilliant. I’m also tearing my way through a book about Zelda Fitzgerald—not an autobiography, obviously—but still gorgeous. Also Joan Didion. Her books, even her fiction (which is very autobiographical) is so incredible. You can feel it. A book like [Play it as it Lays](#), I just feel Joan Didion screaming out of the page. So yes, those are the women right now keeping me company.

Name

Karen Elson

Vocation

Musician, Model

Fact

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Photo by Heidi Ross