

Kelley Deal on having multiple creative outlets



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In addition to being a founding member of rock band The Breeders (alongside her twin sister Kim) and a current member of R.Ring (who will release their new record, *Ignite the Rest*, next spring), Kelley Deal is a prolific creator. In 2008 she released a book, *Bags That Rock: Knitting on the Road with Kelley Deal*, and she currently sells her handmade scarves (along with other items) via Kelleydeal.com.

When asked for a "fact" about herself, Deal provided the following: "Steve Albini once told me that I am basically the answer to a trivia question. Name a person who 1) Has a platinum record 2) Is a published author 3) Has a TOP SECRET government clearance (now inactive) and 4) Has been arrested for a felony. The answer? Kelley Deal."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2278 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

Aside from your life as a musician, you have a side career based on making things. Where did your love for knitting, sewing, and crafting come from?

My mom and dad are from West Virginia, and their parents are from West Virginia. I myself was not born in West Virginia, but there's a lot of West Virginia Appalachia mountain stuff. [My sister] Kim and I always joke about how it used to be fun to listen to my mom and dad try to out-poor each other, about how poor they were when they grew up. "We were SO poor..." Oh my God. One of the things that is taken very seriously there is making things with your hands. Handmade things. "Craft" is almost a bad word. It doesn't elevate it enough. The things people there make are just unbelievable.

My grandmother did this very intricate kind of crochet. She had rheumatoid arthritis and I can remember her hands... they were grotesque: bony, deformed, disfigured, but she takes the smallest crochet needle to work with. It's crazy. Usually crochet needles are described in alphabetical letters. She's in the numbers that come before the alphabet, like a two. It's basically like a thick needle and a heavy kind of thread, and with that she does these amazingly beautiful bedspreads—huge bedspreads—all with these little deformed fingers.

In our family there is this beautiful christening gown that's been hand crocheted like that. We never actually wore it because we never got baptized—our dad, the atheist—but we still have it anyway. She also made these intricate doilies. People might have this really ugly furniture, but then you'd throw this wonderful piece of crochet lace on top of it to make it beautiful. We also grew up around all kinds of sewing and quilting. It was never looked down upon as "crafty"—even though sometimes it involved, like, kooky kitschy toilet seat covers and stuff like that (which I think are kind of fun, honestly). These ways of making things were highly respected and they were talents that got passed down from generation to generation. That's where I learned it, from my mother.

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I always enjoyed making things, but I was never obsessed until I got sober, and I went on my first "sober" tour to Europe with The Breeders. I was in Amsterdam. This is before the days of the internet or cable or anything, and it was the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep because of the jet lag, and I was in a hotel room going, "Oh

my god, there are only two things I can watch on television and I cannot read right now." It's a terrible scenario to be in when you're a newly sober person. That's when I thought, "I just need to sit here and do something."

I had always wanted to know how to knit. I knew how to crochet, but I didn't know how to knit. The girlfriend of the opening band's drummer taught me how to knit on that tour... and that was it. Then I started obsessively knitting. Not only did it get me through that tour and help me stay occupied, but it kind of changed my life. It got me involved in creating all sorts of different things. I started to have this parallel life as a creator. Eventually I wrote a book about knitting, which is not something I ever would've imagined myself doing.

It's interesting that at the same time you were playing in this iconic rock band you were being saved by this old-fashioned art-making practice from your childhood. It makes sense though; most people don't realize how much downtime being in a band involves.

It's funny that you say that. One of the things my mom and I used to do together--this is way before I even had any band or drug experiences--was we used to go to Ben Franklin's together, which is a kind of well-known craft store. They had quilting classes. It was once a week for about six weeks or so. We went every week together. You learned how to make these elaborate, hand-sewn (no machine!) quilt blocks. We would each do a particular square, whether it's the "grandmother's flower garden" or the "drunkards path." Anyway, that was something we did together. Then, of course, I eventually started quilting obsessively.

Speaking of the downtime in bands, here's a story about how my sewing life and music life collided. When The Breeders--me, Kim, and Jim MacPherson--packed the U-Haul in 1994 to take all of our gear out to San Francisco to record *Last Splash*. It was like, "Oh, here's my Marshall amp, okay. Wait a minute, here's my sewing machine." So, I made sure to get my sewing machine in there. Me and Kim and Jim get in the U-Haul and we drive across the country through a snowstorm, get to the space where we got out our equipment, unload everything, and out comes my sewing machine.

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Because there is so much down time when you're recording an album--especially during rhythm section, yawn, drums and bass--I get my sewing machine out and just start working on my quilt. Kim walks by and says, "What would that sewing machine sound like if we put a mic on it?"--and that ended up being one of the sounds on the record.

It's on "S.O.S." You can hear my sewing machine going chikichikichika, which is awesome because that song has been sampled by The Prodigy for "Firestarter", and then [Kiss'] Gene Simmons did a cover of that song. I don't know if my sewing machine also made it on to Gene's record, but I do know that his record is actually called *Asshole*. It's so funny to me.

Does Kim share your affinity for making things?

During my intense quilting period, I pieced this quilt together and it was beautiful and then I put it aside because it was time to do the actual quilting--which is when you attach the quilt blocks to the backing and put a trim around the whole thing. It was a huge bedspread. I had gotten it into my mind, "I'm going to finish this quilt" so I start doing it. The thing is, Kim, she likes to needlepoint--like tiny little stitches and things. She loves to do that. I thought, "Wait a minute. Kim really likes to needlepoint, let me see if she would be interested in quilting this" and she did.

I ended up having to say to her, "Listen Kim, first of all, you're doing a great job, but if you could make it look like it's more hand-done. You are hand-sewing a quilt. You are hand-quilting, and these look like machine stitches," because she gets so obsessed. It was too perfect, really. It was weird. I said, "If you can make a stitch crooked every once in a while, that might be good. This is hand-quilted, we don't want people to think it was done by a machine." She does a really good job!

You have a successful creative life outside of the band. You have your book about knitting, plus a business

making scarves. How do these creative outlets function together in your life?

It's interesting, because there is something very meditative about doing this kind of work—like when you are knitting—and the same is true of making my scarfs. They are pieced together from different kinds of fabric and each of them gets given a name before I sell them, so I often think of the process of putting one of them together much like writing or mixing a song. It's so similar in terms of how I think about it.

When I look at colors together I start thinking things like, "Hmm, that's a nice piece of tension right there, that color against that color, it's a nice discordant moment there. Oh, and it's going to go right into that soft peach. Very nice on the eye." When you think about it that way, you've just changed some terminology. It could sound like a song. The other thing is, how far can you go in disharmony or discordant sounds or discordant colors or vision? How far can you go before it becomes *not* harmonious? Sometimes, isn't that the point of a song? Like jazz, just absolute free jazz. That's the whole point of it, to be unsettling and to be not harmonious but somehow as a piece it works. What does that mean? I think about that, both when I make "things" but also when I make songs. In a way, each scarf is a song. It's its own complete thought, and it even has a name, which is weird.

5 Inspire-y Go-Tos from Kelley Deal:

Tao Te Ching - When I read a page from this book before I start my day it's kinda like running a "virus scan program" for my mind.

Aube - Is it noise? Is it music? Does it matter? And the packaging is so thought-full.

The Sartorialist - I care fuckall for "fashion" but I can go here whenever I need a hit of inspiration for color or texture. (Thank you fella!)

Lucy Worsely Videos - It's such a tonic to watch someone so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about a given topic. Hers is British history.

"American Fashion Podcast" - No, really. Fuckall. BUT... when I listen to these people talk about the state of the fashion industry it sounds like they could be talking about the music industry or magazines or publishing. It's interesting and it opens my mind to accepting change.

Doing something outside the parameters of the band sort of allows you to have autonomy over what you're making. You get to exercise some kind of creative freedom that's solely yours.

I think it's more that it's creative freedom that has nothing to do with music, more than it being something outside of the band. When I explore things in the scarf realm or visual realm, it's a wonderful freedom because I have no dog in that fight. In a wonderful way I kind of don't care. It's all exploration, it's all good. However I want it to go, it's fine.

When I do that with music, whether that's working in The Breeders or working with Kim in her solo stuff, or even on my own stuff, I'm actually my own worst critic. It's terrible. It's so important to start to create before the critic comes out. You've almost got to beat the clock on that. There's this wonderful freedom about the other, and I think it's because it came as just me kicking around on it. The scarf doesn't come out and then get a review.

Pitchfork doesn't review your winter season scarf.

"Her sewing stitch between square three and four aren't really working. Her old stitches were much more interesting." No. Obviously, I do the best job I can, but that's not what it's about. It's a wonderful freedom, which I would like to have more of when I make music or when I pursue things musically.

I'm just gonna make whatever I want and I'm fine with that. That's what's kept me happy and sane all these years.

It's funny, with R. Ring—which is the music project I have with my friend Mike Montgomery—we do a lot of creative

stuff. Sometimes we'll have an idea for some kind of funny packaging, so we'll take a CD of some demo we made that we liked and just use it—almost as an excuse to create the packaging. The music is almost an afterthought, hopefully not in quality or vibe, because obviously we're going to be crazy about that as well. It helps us to release some things in a fun way that's just for that moment. Here is the song—it's not the end all be all version of this song. It is this song today. It's trying to capture that joy of a moment. Usually that's facilitated when we come up with this crazy packaging. Like once we did crocheted covers with a little recipe card in it that you could also use as a hot pad. Stuff like that.

The music industry is so unpredictable now, you might as well do things that feel fresh and make it fun. The regular system of doing things doesn't generally allow for that.

I can't even speak on the music industry. I don't really understand it. I used to think, "I just don't get it because I'm old," but what I finally realized is that nobody gets it. There is no answer. It's not like somebody has it in their pocket and is just not sharing with me. Nobody gets it.

There's something wonderful about that. Once I found out that there wasn't a right answer, it's like, "Cool, we're good." I'm just gonna make whatever I want and I'm fine with that. That's what's kept me happy and sober and sane all these years. I guess that's the lesson—if you feel like doing something, saying something, making something, just do it in whatever way feels right for you.

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Writer, Knitter, Creator

Fact

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