On letting people in

Musician and actor Sharon Van Etten discusses eschewing the idea of industry relevance, starting from the ground up to make her recent album, and why she'll always feel a little like a traveling shoe salesman.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 1892 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Collaboration, Process, Promotion, Family.

You were averse to the concept "jamming" until you started working on your new album. What kept you at bay?

Growing up in the '90s in New Jersey, my relationship with it is complicated. I think not just because of the music, but also the drug culture that seems to surround some of the scenes that perpetuate it. I'm not anti-drug. That's a whole other conversation. But I saw, at a very young age, pros and cons of it all. I won't name names. I won't point fingers. I'm one of five kids. I'm the only one that didn't really sign on to the parking lot culture that I think you know what I'm talking about.

I came into being a musician later in life. I was a choir kid, I was in theater, I played guitar, but I wasn't trying to be in a band. I didn't have the confidence to say, "I'm an artist" or anything like that in my teenage years. But I enjoyed it. I loved Ween and wrote silly songs about what I saw, not knowing anything about the future, of course—who knows that? I loved to sing and I had a couple friends who I would play guitar with, never thinking that it would be a career. I didn't even really have a band until my 30s; I was solo up until then. My idea of a jam was a never-ending jam and being the last person in the corner with a guitar. But now, having had a deeper relationship with music and other musicians, that feeling has evolved for me.

How did it feel to settle in with the band? Was there an element of letting go?

Letting go is definitely a huge part of it. It was empowering to learn how to not feel like I had to steer the ship and to lean into each other's ideas. I know this is not a new idea to anyone who has ever had a band; I'm having this connection and realization later in life. There's a part of it that I'm a little embarrassed about. In my late teens, early 20s, I came out of a pretty traumatic relationship with someone who told me that anyone that would want to play with me just wanted to get into my pants. He was also very abusive, so I've carried those co-existingly throughout my life. My writing has stemmed from a place of healing and getting over that period of my life. It's been a series of different ways of letting other people in, to support me and help me convey my ideas [that come] from a place I was trying to protect for so long. Having a band represents my healing process: trusting people and letting go in this way, and feeling seen by everyone I'm in the room with and letting them see me.

What did you hear in early demos that made you think, "This is working, let's keep going"?

Everyone had their own space. I'm used to playing guitar or keys, and singing and building the demo up myself before I share it with anyone. Starting from the ground up, it's a matter of listening and patience and knowing when to lean in and hang back. Before I knew we were writing songs, I loved it as this sonic trust fall… I'm

curious what happens without forcing it to be something. There's a lot of patience and support without the stacking of ideas… I had a lot more freedom to sing because I didn't have to play the whole time. Everyone got to develop parts and have more movements, in a way.

You also chose to get everyone together in a communal space as opposed to a formal rehearsal studio.

I thought it would be enlightening for everyone to come and reconnect as people after Covid. To meet each other, have discourse, and have a bit of a literal band camp—to have breakfast, lunch, dinner together. The house and studio were separate. This studio, Gatos Trail in Yucca Valley, was amazing, and we were able to get to know each other in this very real way, and then go to a space where we could be in the room together and hash out songs without it feeling like we're on the clock. After a week of going through all the songs, we had an extra two hours at the end. I was tired of hearing my own voice and was very inspired by the palette we had been honing, and I asked if we could just jam. We wrote two songs right away in that environment.

It's so important to carve out space for the people that are choosing to be a part of your universe.

They're giving up their life for you. I know it sounds dramatic, but it's real. That's why I called the band The Attachment Theory. You leave friends and your family behind and you become each other's chosen family. You're basically saying, "If there's anything I'd rather do than be home and feel safe, it's be with you." We're artists, and this is part of the deal. Home is everywhere, your community is everywhere, and you're nurturing this thing. But I still feel like there's an element of being a traveling shoe salesman. I mean that in a positive way. We believe in this and we're nurturing a community, but it's not like it's getting any easier. I don't have to tell you that.

You have an extensive backlog of ideas. How do you know when to revisit one of them?

I tend to write in my writing space, where I'm able to record enough. If I'm traveling and I have an instrument or a melodic idea, I try to get it down enough, or I'm like, "Okay, I want to pursue this when I get to a place where I can pursue this." Most of the time, I'm feeling something deeply and I hit *record*, and I write a stream of consciousness to get the feeling out. Depending on the situation—if it's days, weeks, months later—I'll try to listen back to it with some perspective, to try to analyze what it was I was feeling. I'll write anywhere from one to ten fragments that can be from 2 to 15 minutes long, just to get an overall feeling out… One thing I want to be better at is having more of a narrative in my writing. It's rarely where my inspiration comes from. I've had writing exercises where I learned how to do that better, but most of my songs are more feelings and unfinished thoughts, ideas.

Do you feel internal or external pressure to stay creative?

I feel lucky that I don't feel the pressure from my orbit. In my 40s, as a mom pursuing music, my concern has never been my relevance. I was a late bloomer from the get-go. My first album came out in 2009. I was late to everything. So I've always been behind the curve, as far as the industry is concerned. I have an understanding of that, but it hasn't been a concern of mine.

My husband is a manager and he works with younger artists, and I understand the pressures of singles and the streaming platforms, and he helps me try to stay engaged on social media in a way that I probably wouldn't… I feel grateful that I work with a label that is album-centric and we can focus on the record and focus on a campaign. I'm not pressured. It's, "You tell us when you're ready and let's figure out the best timing for that." [My label] Jagjaguwar has been supportive whenever I want to do something. I like to write with other people and sharpen a different tool in my belt; I think it's always a good thing to experiment with other people and try new things. You make things according to who you're surrounded with. Then I find the right time to put things out. But I don't like putting too much out or putting too much on my calendar. I have an 8-year-old kid and I'm 44, and it's just more complicated. I'd rather feel more invested when I'm ready.

Have you found your stride with balancing motherhood and your career?

I definitely haven’t figured it out, and I’m also learning that you can’t separate those things. I do feel like a crazy person going from having this performance on a theater stage and then going and chaperoning a class trip. But I know those things coincide. This is going to sound funny, but my kid is so supportive of me. Every time he’s come to the studio, we have talks about, “You know when I make a record, what happens,” and he’s like, “Oh, well, you go on tour.” “Yeah, but what’s that mean?” He’s like, “That means you’re gone.” And I’m like, “Yeah, but now you’re in real school.” The last two tours I did, it was COVID or just past COVID, where it was easier to take him. With this album, I’m more invested. I want to show the band I’m going to work this one harder for all of us, but that means more touring. My kid was so sweet, he just said, “Mom, you can’t stop singing.”

Oh my god.

Yeah. Talk about making me cry and fall on my knees. We’re going to be touring this year and next year. It’s going to be the most I’ve been gone. He understands time and space in a way where he didn’t before and you just can’t separate those things.

Years ago you got some important advice from Nick Cave about live performance and looking people in the eye. What impact has this had for you on stage?

When I walk out on stage, it takes the first three songs to shake my nerves, and usually my nerves make me teary. So the first one to three songs, I’m mostly closing my eyes and getting past the tears to the point where I can open my eyes. I try to focus on an audience member. If I can find that, great; if not, I can turn to my band and reconnect with my band. That settles me in this other way, and then I can turn back to the audience and have moments where I feel like I’m having conversations directly with them. You can’t control chemistry. You can’t control the energy of a room. You have to perform no matter what. I still believe in that part of it. Some of it can be acting. But some of it is, “How do I wield this energy to all of our benefits, and get through it to be able to do my job?” Sometimes it’s funny, sometimes it’s sad.

Sharon Van Etten recommends:

The Beauty of What Remains by Steve Leder

Lives Outgrown by Beth Gibbons (album and live show!)

Room to Dream, David Lynch memoir from his perspective and his friends’

David Sedaris’ Masterclass on Storytelling (saw this on the plane and laughed out loud)

Weingut Heinrich naked white wine

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