On starting from scratch

Musician and producer Lotic discusses what can be learned from moving to a new city and starting over, making music in a chaotic environment, and the importance of recognizing your support systems.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2578 words.

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***Power* is a record that's tied together with your identity and personal transformation. It also features your actual voice for the first time. How does it feel to put such personal work out into the world?**

It's weird. I mean it's always weird when you release anything, because you've usually been working on it for so long and then once you're done it feels strange to see it out in the world. This record kind of feels like a stepping stone, which is not a thing I've ever felt before. Now I'm working on what I feel is the next logical thing, because now I actually have time to work on music and a space to work on music consistently, which I didn't have before. I'm definitely very proud of the record, but at the same time there's this feeling of, "Oh but wait, there's more!"

I was reading a recent interview where you talk about how it's only recently that you allowed yourself to say, "This is my dream job and I'm enjoying doing it." I found that interesting. For a lot of creative people, the actual creative process often gets tied up in some way with their pain. It's easy to forget sometimes why you started doing it in the first place, or forget that making things should hopefully be a source of pleasure or release, and not necessarily a source of anxiety.

Yes. I was kind of making a point about how, yes, obviously my pain is an easy inspirational source to pull from, but with *Agitations*, my last record, I really feel like I got it out of my system. Looking forward, I honestly cannot see a record like that ever happening again. Obviously, life will continue to happen to me, but I would rather respond with comedy and love and lightness, and find the more pleasurable moments, and to focus on the pleasure rather than the pain.

I think it also has something to do with being young. When you're a kid and you're like, "Ugh, my life is so hard, please help me!" I was always this damsel in distress and such a drama queen about things. At the time those feelings are very real, but that's not me now. I just felt like it was time to put more of my personality in the music and to also just be able to enjoy things. Also, I wanted to enjoy playing those songs in front of people. It is very strange to play a record full of sad songs to an audience of people who probably don't know who you are. If I'm not having fun playing the songs, that should tell me something.

It's harder to make art that really articulates joy and happiness than it is to make art about sadness or struggle. People take "difficult" work more seriously most of the time.

It's true. At the same time, no one wants to hear about how my life is great. *Nobody* wants to hear that. [*laughs*] I think there's a fine line. You can work it out.

Articulating joy and liberation is a hard thing to do, but it's just as important.

It totally is. I want people to feel good when they listen to my music in general. I don't know why it took me so long to get to this point, but I guess it just happens.It's just kind of funny that I'm a DJ and I want people to dance and feel good when I play live, but then on the production side, everything I made was so serious and dark. I just want people to feel good about themselves. Music should be an escape, not something pulling you deeper into your hole.

As an artist, sometimes it takes time to get to a point where you feel like you can do that. Sometimes you actually have to feel good before you can make other people feel that way too.

Yeah, that was one of my main goals for this record. I wasn't sure if I succeeded at first, but one thing that let me know that I had was the fact that I was afraid of a lot of the tracks. Certain tracks—songs like "Nerve" or "Solace"—I would have *never* put those out when I was younger. I would have never done a collaboration. At the very last minute it was like, "Okay, we can actually release this, it's fine." It felt like a leap. With everything that was going on in my life, I was like, "Girl, you have nothing else to lose, so just do this. As an artist, you owe this to yourself and you owe this to whoever is paying attention to you." You never know who's listening.

A lot of artists have this fantasy of pulling up stakes, getting rid of all their stuff, and running away to a new city to reboot and recreate themselves—which is basically what you did when you moved to Berlin. How was that experience?

It took a long time to find my footing here, to be honest. I moved here with my husband, who was my first boyfriend ever. We're not together anymore. I knew one person here who would book me for gigs. Luckily I met basically everybody that I know now—or about half the people I know now—during that first week. That helped a little bit, but it was fucking crazy and stupid and when anyone has asked me if they should do it too, I say no. No.

I had never even been to Berlin before. Why did I do this? What was I expecting? I don't know. For me, it wasn't about coming someplace new as much as it was about getting away from someplace else. It was about leaving the States. I was in the suburbs of Houston, which is nothing like being here. Given what was happening in America, I just felt like I had to leave. It was less about running towards something than it was about running *away* from something else. Now that I'm here and things are good—and I'm really good now—it's hard to talk about, but it honestly did take four or five years to get my life together here. Also, I still don't speak the language.

What were the upsides of sort of starting over from scratch?

It really lets you see who is truly there for you. It took me a while to realize that I had this support system; even when I had it I kept expecting it to not be there for some reason. When I was working on this record I actually realized, I have these incredible people in my life. These people will *really* ride or die for me… and I had no idea, because I was so used to being alone, and doing everything on my own.

Do you have a proper studio setup where you live? How do usually work?

As of like two months ago, yes, I have a place. I mostly just work at home now, but before I'd work wherever I could. I'd gotten used to being able to work wherever, because I'd been on tour basically nonstop for years. But now that I have a place, a steady home after a tumultuous couple of years, I definitely prefer working here. Hotel rooms are cute to work in, too, but there's nothing like being able to spread out and not having to live out of your suitcase. But I definitely don't have any fancy gear or anything like that; it's more of an open space kind of thing, as opposed to like, an actual studio space.

Do you have routines around making things, or is it more chaotic?

It's pretty chaotic. [*laughs*] Sometimes I'll just hear something… someone will say a phrase, and that will be the start of a song. Yesterday I wrote down something that my friend said. We were on the phone, and he said something was "a web of nastiness and stupidity." And I was like, "Oh my god, that's my next album." I'm that kind of person. I will leave the bar to go work on a track because somebody said something that stuck in my head. I have a notepad with me all the time now so I can record these things and then just come back to them later,

as opposed to running out of the bar in the moment. Getting into the habit of actually using the notepad is a different thing.

When you're working on music and you start to feel stuck or like something isn't working, do you tend to just stop and walk away from it? Do you scrap things?

I stop, but I don't throw anything away. I don't put pressure on myself to finish anything. I usually just think, "Okay I had this idea for a reason, but it's just not working right now. Let me go take a walk." I can only do like 20, 30-minute intervals, because I'm so fast. If I have an idea, I can get it down quickly. Once it's down, it's down. I don't have to make a whole album out of it. I'll literally just go outside for a walk for 20 more minutes and then come back. It depends on what the deadline is, but usually I'll just write it down, make a little something, think about it for five or six days, and then go back to it.

When everything is so loose and chaotic, did that make finishing your record even more difficult? Did you need someone to give you deadlines?

Yes, it's chaotic, but I can really only work on music for tiny intervals anyway. I can only actually sit and focus on one thing at a time for like 30 minutes before I get too distracted. For this record, it was a bit different and more extreme because for any of those 30-minute periods I had to work, I also had to find a place to live, or look for a job and send emails. So all of the time that I would have been working on music or whatever, sitting and writing lyrics, most of that was spent having to do something else, like normal life shit. It really, really delayed the process.

I was supposed to have this record finished last January, like in 2017, but then life just got crazy. I had to move out of the place I was living in without literally any notice, so the record got pushed aside for things like, "Where am I going to live?" It just felt like Berlin was clearly not working out or what I was doing just wasn't working for me, so maybe I'll try something else?

I don't know how I ended up with an album to be honest. I just kind of made time for it where I could. Honestly, it's such a blur I don't really remember much of it. But I think the few gigs that I had outside of Berlin, being outside of my situation, gave me that mental freedom to work on music.

It's interesting that the music sounds so assured. It doesn't reflect that chaos.

Well, I also didn't want to work on it if I wasn't in a good mood. I needed this record to be really positive. So if I wasn't feeling a certain beat, I wasn't going to touch it. I didn't even bother. Maybe because everything was so chaotic in my life, I wanted the record to be the opposite of that.

Perhaps it is too early to say, but it will be interesting to see what happens next, now that you have a place to work and your energy isn't being siphoned off dealing with crazy life scenarios. How do you feel like this will affect your way of working moving forward?

I don't know, but I'm curious, too, because it feels so much less urgent. I like *Power* and I'm definitely ready to tour, but at the same time, it is hard to go back to about half of the album, which was specifically written during those darker times. I just had to write music, as an emotional release. I was like, "I'm not going to put this on a record, but I have to just get it out." And then it ended up going on the record. So I don't know, I'm nervous, but I'm more excited than nervous.

This record feels very natural and right to me, and that's what you always want. I knew this was the record that I wanted to make from the beginning. The only thing I'm a bit nervous about now is the experience of transitioning in public. There was no getting around that. I definitely have always had my face out there, and everyone knows what I look like if they've seen me DJing or whatever, but I used this record as an excuse to really just unlock all the rest of the doors. For a lot of people it's going to seem new, or maybe even like a gimmick, but really this is just the rest of the story.

Going through a gender transition is complicated enough regardless, but doing so in the public eye can't be easy.

The funny thing is, it seemed like everybody knew before me. When I came out to my friends they were like, "Oh girl. We know." It was nice. It took away a lot of the pressure that I was expecting to feel. It's been very comfortable and easy so far. So that's good.

Is a song like "Distribution of Care" addressing that—the support you need coming from all of these different, sometimes unexpected, directions?

It was about realizing that I had these people I could pull from. There's one friend who was really good at finding apartments. There's one friend who could lend me money. There's one friend who would always give me real talk when I needed it. You get different things from different people. Because I'm very independent and proud and annoying, I will give, give, give, give and not ask for help. I've really changed over the last two years after I realized what I had. It's about realizing when I can give as a musician and as an artist, and then when I can receive instead. You are a part of this network, it's an ecosystem. Both as an artist and just as a human being, it's all about the give, take, give, take. Sometimes you are the prey and sometimes you are the predator. Sometimes you're the giver, sometimes you're the taker. And that's okay. You can be happier and healthier and more productive when you recognize that you are a part of this ecosystem and learn to value it.

Right now what happens next is a big question mark. Things will be good, though. I'm really excited. It's just kind of like everything is still slowly coming together, so I'm not sure. I still get a bit nervous, but honestly for the first time in years I can say I'm not worried. It's crazy.

Lotic recommends:

shea butter
coconut oil
sparkling water
meditative walks
sunscreen

Name
Lotic

Vocation
Musician, Producer



Photo credit: Matt Lambert