On harnessing the resources within



Musician Angel Marcloid on teaching yourself to make things, knowing when your creative practice is occupying a healthy amount of energy, and the benefits of simplifying your life and spending time with cats.

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As told to Leah Mandel, 3844 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Time management, Education, Multi-tasking.

I read an interview in which you said every time someone asks you this, you have a different answer. I want to know what the answer is today. What got you into making music and art?

Let’s see if I can find a different answer that is simultaneously true along with the others. I’ve talked a lot about getting into music because of some of the music my parents listened to, but something that I’ve always tied very, very closely to music is emotion. Even at my youngest, I remember music making me feel sad or happy or angry.

There were instruments and music around me that got me into music, but the passion for wanting to create it and not just listen to or enjoy it, was emotion. I don’t think my emotions back then were that complicated. Probably very simple and primal and pure, being so young. But it was definitely cathartic, in my earliest experiences. Even just banging on pots and pans or plucking a guitar with all the strings open. There was an emotional connection to it that really pulled me into wanting to make it and not just listen. It was an expression of feeling, in a super simple and abstract way, obviously, because, you know, I’m talking about being like two or three years old here.

What have you been listening to and exploring recently?

I’ve been working a lot on my own music. I just got done finishing another album. I’m also working on mixing and mastering projects for clients because people hire me to do that. But as far as what I want to listen to when I feel like listening to music, I’ve mostly been listening to jazz fusion and new age music, and I’ve been getting really, really into technical, extremely heavy metal. I’ve always liked death metal and technical metal of all kinds. I grew up on Dream Theater and a lot of progressive stuff. I’ve been getting really into Wideck, Exivious, Intervals, and Plini.

I prefer stuff that has jazz fusion influence in it, but not necessarily. Just anything really heavy, really technical. I’ve been listening to a lot of that lately and I think it’s working its way into some of my music. I’ve always done heavy, metallic parts in some of my Fire-Toolz songs, but I think what I have in me to do at the moment is to get super technical about it and write some crazy stuff that’s hard to follow.

It’s considered prog or progressive, which usually entails lots of abnormal time signatures, and a lot of times there’s a lot of speed and endurance involved, but there’s always a big focus on being precise and a lot of that these days is studio magic. They take it to the extreme, lining every beat up and cutting out all the tiny bits

of silence and sustains, so things sound mechanical. I appreciate that aesthetic, but I do really require a good mood. It's not just flashiness. I have to feel something. It's got to make me feel sad, or uplifted, or something, for it to be good, in my opinion. There's a lot of stuff out there that's otherwise good, but it doesn't really move me, so I don't get super into it. I have to have a strong connection to it.

Did you go to school for music or art?

I haven't done any college except for some courses that I took years after high school. I was actually playing so much music in my high school years and playing in bands and playing shows late at night, that it contributed to me preferring to get homeschooled from 10th grade on. I ended up graduating a year early, getting my GED and just moving on and working more on music and doing what I wanted to do.

I never liked school. Never enjoyed it. I thought a lot of the teachers were mean and people were not really nice to me. I got bullied quite a bit for being a weirdo, and the environment was just not conducive to learning. We had to get up so early that people just couldn't do it. And bags were so freaking heavy and the lunches were terrible, and my high school was a really highly rated school. But I hated school. I got homeschooled and did music and did my own thing and didn't really have a huge social life.

I have a pretty rigorous self-education. I did take some lessons when I was younger. A few years with drums. A few years with guitar. Nothing super intensive. Just a private instructor who my parents knew. Everything else has pretty much been self-taught, and that usually means my technique is weird or unconventional and probably not the most practical. I'm sure the way I do a lot of things is kind of weird because of the lack of formal training. But it's been fun this way. It's limiting in one sense and freeing in another. I do value education, though. I'd love to go to college. I would like that experience and to get a formal education. It's not like I have anything against it. I know the education system is messed up and all that, but I would love to dive into something and learn it the right way. Maybe one day, but probably not.

Because of the way that you talk about music, I wondered if you studied music theory or if you'd ever done academic writing about it.

All my theory knowledge is what I've been able to soak up in my experience. I learned a little theory when I took guitar lessons when I was younger, but mostly everything else has been through the internet. When I was really young, I would sort of figure out things that were established music theory—because of the way it sounded, it made sense to me. I remember screwing around on a guitar in a guitar store and somebody that was there heard me and he was like, "You just played the harmonic minor scale." And I was like, "What?" Because I was like five or eight or something and he's like, "Yeah, you're playing scales. Do you take lessons?" I'm like, "No." I played it that way because it sounded right. It sounded like a thing. It sounded like a vibe and I was just playing through the notes that gave me that vibe, that gave me that feeling. I started to learn a little bit of it and it was crazy how a lot of things I had kind of figured out on my own, then I learned a name for it.

What are your working habits like? Do you sit down to make something? Do songs come to you in dreams?

At this point, I primarily use a computer to do most of the music—besides a few external instruments, but that's not usually where I start. I usually start with a computer. Synth parts, or loops, or something like that. Everything is totally stream of consciousness. There are never any plans. Every once in a while, maybe, I'll look over a project and I'm like, "I really want to start a track with something that sounds like *this*." So I'll do that, but then it'll end up changing completely anyway, or something will get added onto it that's totally different than what you might think would happen.

I just sit there and ideas just come out and it really almost feels like I'm not trying. Like, I'm not doing anything. I don't really over think any of my ideas. The only writer's block I've ever experienced has been with lyrics—but then, I figured out a few techniques to get things out and now I don't really deal with that anymore. Having trouble coming up with material—it's comically not even within my range of understanding. I have never been bored my entire life. I have no idea what boredom is. I have no idea what it's like to not know what music to make. There are not enough years in my life to make all the music I want to make. I mean, the fact that

there’s only four Fire-Toolz albums out in the past three years drives me nuts. I could do so much more than that but I can’t because, the music industry. You can’t put out like three records in a year. No one’s going to release those so that’s why I have multiple projects. I don’t know why it’s this way. Maybe I just have, like, no filter and I need one.

How do you keep all the different projects separate in your mind?

The funny thing is, sometimes they combine, and sometimes a project will end because what I’m feeling like doing at the moment is maybe stuff from two different projects. I’ve had projects where I do a couple things and I want those things to be on their own. Most of the time, there’s either a sound associated with a moniker or there’s a process associated with it, and sometimes both. With the different monikers and the different projects, there’s always some reason why they are the way they are, or there’s a correlation between the name and the process or the genre or something.

It’s like a universe.

And some of the galaxies have split apart, or they’ve collided. I’m way into armchair cosmology, so I’m thinking of all the diagrams and famous NASA images of those things in my head right now.

You’re mostly self taught, and you’re on the internet a lot. Are there forums and sites that you frequent?

I’ve withdrawn a lot from the social aspect of the internet. I use Twitter and Instagram pretty regularly, but I used to have my hands in a lot more online communities. As of right now, I don’t really have an artist hang out zone.

With YouTube being available now—obviously some of the education on YouTube is shoddy, you have to be careful—but, YouTube’s got a lot of free resources. And then there are websites out there that have college courses uploaded that you can do for pretty small amounts of money. I’m not saying that I can learn everything I would learn properly in college through YouTube, but I can get by.

Beyond the internet, are there resources that you use for your work? Places you go in Chicago, people you collaborate with?

There’s a lot in Chicago but I don’t really get out much. Something that really makes me happy is having a little bit more solitude. Most of my resources—this is going to sound so corny—they come from within. It is corny but it’s really true and I know that you know what I mean because you’re a creative person, so it doesn’t sound like bullshit. I’m just not super involved in group things and that’s not the way that it used to be.

I’ve gone through huge changes, personality changes, but also much deeper changes, and I’ve gravitated towards more solitude and independence. I like it that way, so it’s really helpful, really inspiring to my work. It enriches it for sure. But that’s not to say I don’t love to be out experiencing nature. I love traveling. I love to be outside when the weather’s fine, and by fine I mean it can be snowing or icing, even—I like that as long as I’m bundled up. That’s inspiring, too. But I’m not at many shows or workshops or anything like that, therefore any sort of external tools and resources, they usually come from the internet or from close friends. There are people in my music scene here that I’m friends with, so there are few people close to me that you could consider resourceful in that way.

Tell me about running Swamp Circle. Is it still active?

It was an internet-based label and they were all free downloads. A lot of the stuff is people’s one-off projects and their odds and ends. Not everything, but a lot of it. I would be playing with some sounds and come up with something that seemed like it needed to be on its own, so I would post it there. It’s not that they don’t have value, but the nature of it is that these things might just not fit in elsewhere. Or, they maybe even failed attempts at something. Or something I did that I didn’t want to go to hard on, so I sort of just had it live

there on Swamp Circle. I would also release stuff from friends that ended up being pretty epic releases—I really liked that it was all mixed in.

I've been simplifying in my life and I do a lot less musical projects than I used to. I ran Swamp Circle, but I also ran a cassette label called Rainbow Bridge for a while. There's no way that would ever fit into my life these days. I have no idea how I did it. No clue! I had a moniker for every idea I ever had, but it got to the point where I just couldn't do all these things. I've sold a lot of equipment. I've sold a lot of my music collection, and switching gears and simplifying. I do have probably five musical projects that are technically active. Some more than others. I, in a very relaxed way, drift between them depending on what I'm feeling, or if somebody has asked me if I wanted to release an album with them or something like that. My friend's label, Hausu Mountain, offered to put out another Fire-Toolz record, and then offered to put out a Nonlocal Forecast record after that. That's what's on my plate, and then after that I'll do a few other things.

What has that simplifying done for you?

It's helped me, instead of constantly going outside of myself, go in. It's a lot more time for meditation and self-education. I consider myself a pretty spiritual person. I study a lot of philosophy, and I have little rituals and stuff. Simplifying makes space for those things. There's a lot of inner turmoil, a lot of mental anguish. A lot I was holding pretty deep inside. So being able to simplify my life and get more in touch with myself has allowed me to work through a lot of that. The simplifying was really needed. At first it was because I had to, because I'm too busy. And then it started to become a way for me to calm down my entire existence and slow down and be in the moment. As much as I love music and as important as it is to me, it can become an escape, and that's not looked down upon. People think that's great but I think that's terrible, if you're constantly escaping and constantly distracting.

Music can be a drug, like a badly harmful, addictive drug. I'm vaping weed right now so I'm not saying anything bad about drugs. Being addicted to Oxycontin or something, you're trying to escape. You're trying to comfort and distract and be somewhere other than where you are, because where you are is too scary and too uncomfortable and terrible. And I feel like people do that with music and art. I definitely did that with music. I didn't even know who I was because it was just music, music, music. A million different projects. As many bands as I could possibly squeeze into my schedule. I just got to the point where I was like, "Whoa, I need to go the other way." Over the course of, like, four to six years ago, is when that started to happen. Maybe in the last two or three it's been a really hardcore calming down processing.

When I am in the space where I feel the desire to escape, I'm not thinking about work at all. I wonder if it's different just because of the zone that you go into with music, versus writing.

I've wondered about that very thing and I think there's two different ways to do it. One is where you're totally present with the music when you're doing it and you're able to come back to reality later so you can get integrated into life. If you can go back and forth, between those two things, without being somewhere other than where you are, then you're good. If, when you play music, you can get in the zone, get into your flow state and be the music and be in it and be with it, and then when it's over you can be a normal human again, than I feel like that's the definition of healthy.

What I'm talking about is not necessarily that momentary escape while you're playing, or while you're writing, or while you're singing. I'm talking about getting lost in the plans and the band practices and the commitments to albums and all the mixing and mastering, just getting lost in that whole world to the point where you don't really actually know who you are, you just know what you want and you might not even know why you want it. So, to me, the flow state zone, presence with the music, is totally different from that distracted, escaping kind of thing. If it's manic, then you're disconnected. You might be totally absorbed in an activity but you're not rooted in the heart of it, conscious of why you're doing it and remembering why you love it. If you're running through the motions, then all you're doing is wishing you were somewhere else and you're just being a robot. Sometimes you have to do that once in a while, in special circumstances. But I think that when it's a pattern or a habit or something that happens every time you get stressed, that's when it's a problem.

I also think that it's totally fine to get lost in the music as a form of therapy for your pain. Music is medicinal and therapeutic. If you're present with the music, if you can be there with it and get in that flow state, I think that in itself is medicinal, or it can be.

Speaking of medicinal—*Field Whispers* is dedicated to your cat, Breakfast.

My next album after *Field Whispers* is actually even *more* dedicated to Breakfast. The reason why *Field Whispers* is dedicated to Breakfast in the way that it was, meaning a mention in the liner notes, is because she had passed away when I was just finishing up the very last stages of that record. She actually does have some meows that appear in some of the songs, and there is a song about my cats, the last track on the album ["Smiling At Sunbears Grooming In Sunbeams"]. But I kind of threw that in there as a quick "In Memory of Breakfast." But my next album that'll be out next year, half of the songs are about her. Most of the songs are about death. The album is called *Rainbow Bridge*. She's going to be on the cover so it's a much bigger thing than *Field Whispers* as far as the dedication to her.

What do the cats do for you? Why do you love them?

I was raised with cats. My mom is a very compassionate person who loved animals. She never went too crazy by having too many or adopting too many weird things, but I was raised around them and she was always really sweet to them. I can remember one of my earliest friends was this tuxedo domestic shorthair, TJ, and we were really close. They're such a part of me. I feel like we have such a connection. They're just so important to me and they're so unique. Any time I see one, it's a big deal. I stop in my tracks and gasp if I see a stray. I saw one yesterday out my window a couple yards down who I think is a stray and I just watched him until he was out of sight. I couldn't help it.

I love them all so much. My cats are really a part of my routine. I feel like we communicate on levels beyond words, and even though I don't understand what they want half the time and even though they don't understand why I do the things I do, pretty much all the time—there's still some kind of understanding and connection and mutual concern and regard and admiration. Our relationships are so rich. You know, when I have one for a long time and we're around each other for years, spend a lot of time together, the relationship becomes so rich and has so much nuance in it to where writing songs to them or about them is not hard. You would think it might be because it's a cat and not a person, but once you're really deep in it with any given one of them, there's so many things to say. So many aspects to explore.

Every cat I've ever had, ever been close to, was its own unique relationship that I'll never forget. If you want me to talk about cats, you're going to have to be specific, otherwise I'll just be like, I don't even know what to say to you. They're amazing.

Angel Marcloid Recommends:

A list of 15 things that zap me into the present moment and connect me to the divine source, the primordial awareness, my essential nature, what some might call "god."

1. A cat relaxing in the sun. (I wrote a song about this)
2. This EP
3. Waking up to snow-covered surfaces
4. The moment the rain begins
5. This song
6. Birds bathing in a city puddle. It is simultaneously sad and joyous to see a wild animal adapt to how humans have wrecked the earth without complaining. Sure, they are made to suffer and struggle, yet *still*, they don't complain. Wild animals are incredible teachers.
7. This song (lol it's the same tempo and relative key as the last song)

8. The smell of autumn
9. This song
10. When someone wakes me up with a cup of fresh hot coffee
11. The quiet night with a dog barking in the far distance
12. Walking outside in nature or down a peaceful sidewalk with a thicc full-body thc buzz
13. The teachings of Rupert Spira, Eckhart Tolle, and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj
14. This song
15. When a stranger’s dog catches my gaze and starts wagging their tail

Name

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Vocation

Musician

Daniel Topete