On finding what’s already there

Musician Sabrina Teitelbaum (Blondshell) talks about figuring out what you want to make, creativity as digging up what’s already there, and finding the right people to help you put yourself out there.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2564 words.

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You used to make pop-adjacent music as BAUM, but now, as Blondshell, you’re more indie rock. At what point did this switch stop being an idea and become a fully necessary leap? How did you know it was time, and how did you make it happen?

It was pretty quick. It never was totally right, that project [BAUM]. There was a lot that just sort of happened because of the people I was around and not knowing how to make the sounds I wanted to make yet. It never really felt right, but it wasn’t like I was waiting to start being Blondshell and then I finally worked up the courage. I wrote “Olympus,” and that was the first song where I was like, “I really like this song, and it feels really different than everything else I’ve made so far. If I were to put it out, I would want to explore this other sound.”

I set that aside for a while, and then, at some point, I started writing all these other songs like “Salad,” “Joiner,” and “Kiss City.” I was like, “This is all very clear to me now.” Once I wrote all those songs, I was like, “Obviously, this is a new project and I need a new name.” I came up with the new name and decided very quickly that this was what I was going to do.

When you talk about having written these songs and hearing a new direction for them, do you mean purely songwriting, or you produced them too and then you knew?

No, just songwriting. I work with a producer, and before I brought him the songs…I had all of them written. There was “Olympus,” which I brought to him at some point, and he was like, “You should definitely write more like this.” Other than that, I was thinking about all this just from an “I have these songs” standpoint.

This makes me wonder, when you listen back to a song you’ve written, to what extent are you able to hear or envision the fully produced version?

It depends. There are songs where I really could hear it. With “Kiss City,” I was like, “I know I want it to be softer and more intimate at the beginning.” Once I decided to go up the octave for the second half of the song, I wanted it to really explode and feel more like a rock song. I knew that going into it. With that song, it was kind of like, “Here’s the references.” [My producer and I would] talk about all the references and go over different drum patterns and stuff like that.

Then, there are songs like “Salad” where it was all written, but there were certain elements where it’s really collaborative. There’s this little keys part that’s kind of creepy at the beginning. We had no intention of having that in there. I hadn’t written that. That wasn’t anything I had in mind. Just by the nature of being with

all these instruments in the studio, we were like, “What if you play this? What if you try it more like this?” There’s a whole range, where sometimes, you know what it’s going to sound like. And sometimes, you’re really just exploring when you’re in the studio.

Little things end up shaping a lot of the production. “Salad” has this element of getting quieter and then getting much louder, then getting quieter again and then getting much louder. I hadn’t planned on that. I got there and the producer was kind of like, “What if we do that with this song?” There’s a lot of range in terms of if we explored or if we just had it and stuck to the plan.

You’re a pretty encyclopedic music listener. As you’ve moved away from pop toward indie rock, have you had to consciously filter out any of your influences, or has it more been along the lines of, you’re just focusing on what interests you?

There’s no filtering out. That was part of the problem with the last project. I always listened to the same things I listened to now. There was never, “Now I want to make rock music, so I’m going to listen to rock.” I always listened to what I listened to, and when I was making the old stuff, there was this big disconnect between, “Here’s the stuff I listen to, and here’s the stuff I’m making. Why do they sound so different?” Now, they’re kind of closer. The stuff I’m listening to makes more sense with the stuff I’m putting out and writing.

As you’re writing songs now, have you noticed this affecting your creative process?

I’ve noticed it a little bit. I always pick it up if there’s an album that I’m obsessed with. Maybe the chords sound a little more like that, or it always creeps into what you’re making if there’s something you’re really listening to. But the writing I’m doing now, it’s harder for me to pinpoint the reference than it was when I was making [*Blondshell*].

A musician I spoke to a couple of weeks ago described songwriting as more like song-catching. It sounds like that’s what you’re describing here. Would you say that’s an apt analogy?

Yeah. I love that analogy. I’ve heard that before. I’ve heard people say that it’s like, if you have a big thing of clay, you’re chipping away pieces that don’t belong there, but the thing that’s going to be there just presents itself. You’re not making it from nothing. It’s already in there. It’s just hidden and you have to find it. I like that analogy also. That always feels right to me. It already exists. You’re just kind of putting it together.

You’re probably the first indie rock musician I’ve heard reference their Judaism in their music. I’m interested in how your relationship with Judaism has fueled your creativity over the years—not the religion itself, but how you’ve felt about religion over the years and how that’s changed. I feel like people get asked this about Christianity all the time but rarely Judaism.

That’s true. My relationship with being Jewish has changed a lot because I grew up in New York City, so it felt like everybody in the world was Jewish, and it was a big surprise for me to learn that was not the case. I know the numbers, so I knew that that wasn’t true, but I just felt like, all my friends are Jewish, everyone’s getting bat mitzvahed, all that stuff, so I was rebellious in every way I could be when I was growing up. There were a lot of times when I was like, “I’m not going to Passover seder. I’m not doing this thing. I’m not going to temple because I don’t believe in the concept of organized religion, because here are all the times in history that it’s been used to do fucked up things.” It’s just one of those things I grew up with and was rebelling against when I was in high school.

As I got older, I realized that so many things I took as normal [were] more part of the reformed Jewish culture that I grew up in. There’s a lot of stuff where—with Jewish comedians and TV shows that aren’t so explicitly about the religion, but they’re with Jewish performers, there’s a certain type of humor, and there’s a certain cultural thing that came out in [my] music, about using humor and lightness to talk about heavy things.

When I was saying “You’ll make a killer of a Jewish girl” [on “Salad”], I was trying to say, “You’re making somebody so mad, and you’re making somebody want to be violent who didn’t grow up to be strong, tough, and violent.” That wasn’t my image of what it’s like to be a nice Jewish girl.

When you were making music as BAUM, I’ve read that some major labels attempted to sign you, but I know that, as Blondshell, you’re with Partisan Records, which is a smaller label. What would you tell a rising musician of roughly your age who’s considering how different types of labels and contracts could affect their creative process and possibilities?

I talked to all different types of people and labels when I was trying to decide what the right home would be for my album. I would just say that people want to make really definitive statements about different types of labels, and everyone’s going to tell you these really definitive things that are probably not true on such a general level. It would be nice to be able to say, “All major labels are like this, and all indie labels are like this,” because that would be an easier form of advice to give to people. It’d be easy if you’re trying to help someone figure out what to do. It’s easy to be like, “If you do this, this will happen.” But the truth is, it is nuanced, and it really depends on who you sign to more than what type of label you’re signing to. When I made my decision, it was because I felt like [Partisan’s team] were the people who really understood my project [and] my show, and I just connected with them.

I was more cautious when I was talking to major labels because I know there’s more of a focus on immediate numbers—how much music are you selling in the first week your album comes out, stuff like that. I know that’s more important to major labels, but a lot of the generalizations, I tried to look past and look at the specific person who was trying to sign me, or that specific company.

I’d be curious to hear more about how collaborating with people at a record label, not just collaborating with a producer or other musicians, shapes your creativity.

I wanted to know [while looking to get signed] what the expectations would be for how involved a label would be in a creative process. Is it cool if I go away for a year and make an album? Is that not cool?

The important part with [*Blondshell*], because it was done and some of it was already out when I was deciding where to sign, was, do you understand me as a person and as an artist? We’re trying to figure out how to introduce myself to people for the first time and how to figure out all the context I want to put behind the album.

When talking about collaborating with a label, I think about all the creative stuff behind getting it out. It’s not fun to talk about this stuff, but…what are your ads going to look like? There’s all that unsexy stuff. I wanted to make sure the people who were helping me make all those decisions were coming from a similar understanding, who knew what I would be cool with and wouldn’t be cool with.

Maybe the advertising and marketing stuff isn’t the most fun to talk about, but it exists. And at least in this iteration of society, it’s still necessary.

Yeah. I think it’s important when you’re talking about who you’re going to sign to because I think it really matters how people see you. There’s so much power in how you present your music, and I wanted to make sure the people who were helping me do that weren’t seeing it in a totally different way, or that the kinds of artists they would compare me to would be the right kinds of artists.

It comes down to your image too, because when I think of your album, I think of the black-and-white photo of just you, which is so stark and unadorned compared to many other album covers. It sounds like that must’ve been an intentional decision and conversation with the label folks and your team.

We did have conversations about all the creative stuff, but something I liked about them was that they also were confident in my ability to make a lot of those decisions for myself. I told them, “I have these ideas, I have

these visual references," and they knew all those things going into it, and they were down with it.

As we're talking about collaborating with people, it makes me think about your live show, especially since you're currently touring with Liz Phair. What role does the Blondshell live show play in your creative process?

It's a huge part of what I've spent the last couple of years doing, and with my last project, I also played live a lot. I've done it for a long time, and it's so collaborative. If you're somebody who wants to control a lot of aspects of the creative process, [playing live is] one of the places where you have the least amount of control because you obviously can't play everything.

There's so much trust that goes into, here we are in a different city, we're exhausted, and maybe this is our first time playing for this many people, or maybe this is the first show on our tour—just trusting people, being present with each other, and not just going into your own world. I think it's easy for people, when you're playing a show, to go into your own world, from my experience. Being able to be present and communicating during the show is a really interesting part of the creative process.

Your song "Sober Together" made me curious: How has going sober improved your creativity? Has it posed any challenges to your creativity?

It has not posed any challenges. I thought it would pose a lot of challenges because there are a lot of messy interactions you have if you're not sober and you end up getting sober. It's easy to think, "What am I going to sing about if I'm not going to a zillion parties a week?" The truth is, there was a lot more for me to talk about, and I was a lot more present for my own life. It did change my writing a lot.

What you said speaks to why I wanted to ask this in the first place, which is this almost romanticization of the idea that, when somebody isn't sober or when somebody is struggling with any mental health condition, it's easier to write songs, but that's not necessarily true, and yet it gets romanticized.

Yeah. I think it's a myth, and I think it's a really dangerous myth. That was a big anxiety for me, where I was like, "What am I going to talk about?" [After going sober], you have more time on your hands, you're more present, and it gets boring to write songs about all that stuff. There's so much more going on than just that setting, and I had to see that for myself.

Sabrina Teitelbaum recommends five things that don't require looking at a screen:

New People by Danzy Senna

R.E.M. *Out of Time* (vinyl)

Switzer Falls hike in LA

Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow by Gabrielle Zevin

Blood On The Tracks, Bob Dylan (vinyl)

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