On creating for yourself



Musician Carla Dal Forno discusses the merits of untraining yourself, responding to the moment, and finding balance.

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As told to Sammy Maine, 2325 words.

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You studied fine art—do you think it's important to explore these different pockets of art to help other forms of it?

I think it was helpful to me, because when I came to music after studying fine art for a while, something felt right. Beforehand, it felt like something was missing. When I discovered music, and started playing in bands and writing songs, I immediately had this connection and confidence in myself, and how I was expressing myself, that I hadn't found in any other art practice. That was encouraging. Maybe if I had come to music first, it would've felt right straight away. I did play music in high school. I was in orchestras, playing classical instruments but it had to be something about the people, and the scene that I was in, when I first started playing in bands, that really felt right. The classical music stuff never felt right.

As you've been embarking on this music career, you've moved around a lot. Do you think there's a danger of becoming creatively stuck should you stay in one place for too long?

I can only speak from my own experience, which is that every time I moved, there was new stimulation, and new experiences to process, new people to meet, which I think has been inspiring. As a young person, maybe it's more important to get that exposure, and find your voice. Now, I'm at the point where I don't want to move anymore. It'll be interesting to see whether my creativity stagnates, or stays still. I'm hoping not.

You've returned to where you grew up. Have you noticed it affecting your creative practice in any way?

I'm living in a small country town outside of Melbourne. I haven't lived here before, but I'm from Australia, and Victoria, so I'm back to my home country. Every time I've made an album, there's been different struggles, and I'm not sure if that's just part of the cycle of working on new material, and developing as an artist, and finding new things. I think that's more the case, rather than being back in my own country.

What were some of the main challenges on this latest album that you had to overcome?

For the first album, I felt like I didn't have the skills to record myself. I'd written some songs, and I really sat on them for a long time. The next album I didn't have the technical skills to produce the stuff that I'd made. I'd recorded it all, but I didn't have someone to co-produce it with anymore. I had to learn a whole bunch of stuff. This time I had had a kid the year before making the album, and it was just finding space mentally, and time, and balancing those demands of a new baby, and trying to write a record at the same time.

That sounds really hard.

Yeah, it was really hard. Having a baby, it fucks up your sleep. That sounds obvious, but I've always been someone that's been a really light sleeper, and having a kid just wrecked any abilities that I had to sleep through the night. The challenges were being quite sleep deprived for a lot of the time that I was writing this album.

The album does explore a lot of insomnia themes. What did your day to day schedule look like when you are creating something like this album? I say day to day, it could be night to night!

It was day to day, and then, I'd just lay awake at night, writing songs in my head. The music wouldn't leave my head when I was laying in bed at night, and it was torture. I'd be writing songs in my head, and I'd completely forgotten them in the morning, when I got up. I just couldn't switch my brain off.

How did you tackle that? Did you try to put some rigidity into your schedule?

My partner wasn't working at the time, and he became the primary carer of our kid. I just treated it like a nine-to-five job, I would be in the studio from nine-to-five, working. I tried to use that energy, or lack of energy, in the creative process. I think that's why that's a theme in the record, sleep deprivation, and how mind altering that can be. Giving into that feeling, and using it to write lyrics. Another side effect of that for this album was I felt that I couldn't write anything too slow. I needed something with a bit of momentum, and pace. Otherwise, I just felt like I was going to fall asleep, basically.

What was it like treating the process as a nine-to-five office job, compared to previous projects, where you had much more of a free flowing approach?

I definitely procrastinated less with this album. I had less time, and that feeling of like, "If I'm not doing anything productive here, I'm spending time away from my child. I just need to really make this time productive, and to count for something."

When do you feel like you create your best work?

It's having long stretches of time. If I'm starting a new song, I want to get as much of it down as possible in one sitting, because I find that it's harder to come back and work on something if you've had a break, or time away. To get into that state of flow where ideas come really easily, and you're not overthinking things, you need a whole bunch of time.

Are you a big editor of your work? Do you go back after that free flowing session?

I think you just find what you like in the piece. What are the elements that are really working? I am a big believer in stripping back the stuff that's not necessary. I've always had a minimal approach to sound, and my work. What are you actually hearing in the song? What are the important elements? By refining that I feel like it can be more potent, or more powerful.

Do you think you've gotten better at that as time has gone on, refining your process in that way?

I was lucky with the first album not really having a plan, or knowing what I wanted my sound to be necessarily, but feeling like my technical capabilities only really allowed me to make stuff that was minimal. If I'd been a better trained musician, or had more technical skills, perhaps I wouldn't have found that sound, or realized that that is what I consider to be a strength of the songs that I make.

Especially in music, there are some people who are so proficient at the technical side of things, or their instruments, they're just so zoned in on exactly what the thing does, and exactly what they want the thing to do, and you have these other musicians who are coming to things like newborn babies, and they're just pressing things, and seeing what works. There's definite merit in both, and there's definite magic in both.

When I started playing in bands, and I didn't know how to play instruments very well, and I was learning a couple

of chords on guitar, my band mate at the time, he had done all this musical training, and knew how to play guitar really well. He had developed this interest in untrained musicians, and was trying to untrain himself. His interest in me as a collaborator was the fact that I didn't know what I was doing. It was all so fresh, and there was nothing complicating whatever creative impulse I had, it was just a pure response to the moment. Now, I have to work harder to find that headspace, or that response in myself, because I have learned so much more making these albums. That newness can be very liberating, and inspiring.

Yeah, that's so interesting, especially in marginalized groups, when we approach the spaces that are overrun with others saying they know how to do everything, it can be really intimidating. I think that stops a lot of marginalized people from stepping into those spaces, or putting themselves out there, or putting anything out there. It's just such a lovely sentiment, to be like, "It's just responding to the present moment, and the creative spark, and running towards that." A kid going to a box of crayons, and picking a color, and drawing a purple tree, even though they don't exist, it doesn't matter. It's what they want to see on the page.

I still feel like that and I still have that response as well. The person that I used to tour with, he was a technical editor for a music magazine and we were worlds apart. I couldn't tell you what the software was that I was working on. At times, I have these responses where I'm like, "I don't know anything," but I'm always coming back to, "No, that's really a strength." Choosing what you learn about, and choosing what is not important to your creative process is fine.

You've worked with a lot of people during your career, but now, you're on your third solo album. Going off in this solo direction, has that changed your perspective in working with others?

I think working with other people is just an amazing experience, especially when I was in bands, and we were improvising, and writing stuff altogether. That experience has never been replicated in any other situation in my life, where you are just channeling something as a group of people. I feel very lucky to have had that experience. For whatever reason I've had the most success with my solo career, so that's what I've pursued. I definitely miss those experiences of working with others, and it's been so important to my development as a musician.

Is there anything that you've taken from those experiences of improvising with others that you've brought to your own practice?

When I'm writing songs now, I try to get into that state of improvising and fully committing to the present moment. If you're writing improvised songs, you only get one. With Fingers, which is an old band of mine, we would sit down, hit record, write a song in one sitting, and we would never come back to it. You got that one chance to make something. If you're second guessing yourself whilst you're creating something, you're putting the brakes on what you might be able to do. That's definitely a challenge that I still have in the studio. It's much easier to pause, and be like, "Am I playing the right instrument? Am I playing the right chord there?"

You started your label imprint a few years ago. What does your process look like when you start up something like that? How do you know it's something you should run towards, and continue to work on?

I wasn't fully confident in the decision when I made it. There's no way of telling how it would've been if I'd gone with another label. You just get to choose one thing, and go down that path, and commit to it. That's what I've done. Starting my label suited my way of working, which is very DIY. I'm a solo musician, I work at home, and it felt right in that sense. I wouldn't be accountable to anyone else's objectives. I could just do things the way that I wanted to do them.

As someone who is so steeped in this DIY ethos, and being a fiercely independent artist, are there any practices you've put in place to stay true to that ethos?

I have to keep reminding myself what I find important about making music, and releasing music. It's having creative control. It's finding a way of being able to express something that I want to say. I was reading an interview with someone else, I can't remember who, and they were talking about making an album, and this idea of,

“I made this so that the audience would feel like this.” Which is fine, but it really surprised me, the differences in our approaches, which was that some people have this idea of creating this product for the audience, and I feel like maybe those people are much more motivated to grow that audience substantially, and have more exposure. I feel like I always have to trick myself, that what I’m making is just for me, and I’m the only one that’s going to get something out of it. It’s more internal, and once it’s made, then I can show people what I’ve done.

I think that is the trick, because we’re so pressured to put things into neat little boxes that are sellable.

It’s the genre question in music, isn’t it? The pressure of having to do that before it’s even created is just ridiculous. Again, I think you’re putting the brakes on potential there, just what it could be.

Carla Dal Forno recommends:

Discreet Music record shop and label: I’ve found a lot of interesting, experimental, diy music via the Discreet Music folk. A good place to look for underground gems.

Literary Friction podcast: This is one of my favorite shows on NTS Radio. I’ve found out about some great authors and books from recommendations by the hosts.

***Drive Your Plow Over The Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk:** I recently read this one and I’d recommend it to anyone who enjoys a good page turner.

Rachel Roddy’s *Two Kitchens* cookbook: Simple Italian Cooking at its best.

The Cascades in Metcalf: A place close to where I live. Getting out in the bush is a great way to come back to the studio feeling refreshed.

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