On embracing vulnerability

Musician Carla dal Forno discusses leaning into uncomfortable feelings, building trust in your creative instincts, and the importance of showing up.

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As told to Arielle Gordon, 1765 words.

Tags: Music, Family, Process, Inspiration, Focus, Success.

Your album is called *Confession*. Do you find it difficult to confess unsavory or embarrassing things through your music?

Music is so private while you're creating it, and you have to block out the knowledge that it's going to be public one day. It's such a good space to really take a look at uncomfortable feelings. I like to use songwriting to practice being direct.

I guess I'm quite good at admitting my own vulnerabilities. When you're making something and you feel vulnerable, it's a really good sign that you're onto something real, and that it might connect with other people as well. Not that that's so much a consideration when I'm making the work, but I think I've learned to recognize that sign, that feeling of exposure, vulnerability, whatever you want to call it, as a good instinct to follow.

You've said you were initially intrigued by lyrical abstraction on this album, but why did you decide to go in a different direction?

When I got back in the studio, I had just had a baby. I just thought, I need a break. I don't want to do something that's too difficult; I don't want to do any personal excavation. I just tried to write these songs that felt a bit removed, and nothing was working for me. I spent three months coming up with all these different demos, and nothing was feeling important enough to invest in.

One day I was mucking around on a guitar and the words to "Going Out," which is the first track that I wrote for this album, just started coming out of my mouth. I felt really interested in this story and this experience that I was articulating, and it gave me so much more motivation to finish the song. At that point I was like, "Okay, this album is not going to be what I imagined it to be."

Do you keep a diary or a notebook when you're generating lyrics?

I did start keeping a diary. When I first started this album, I had writer's block. I couldn't come up with any lyrics that I liked. I read somewhere that the key to unlocking writer's block is just to write. So, I'd get into the studio every morning and write three pages in my journal. I didn't really go back and pick out words or phrases that I was writing down, but I definitely felt that over time I just became freer and more able to write lyrics.

How has motherhood impacted your creative process?

I think I've been thinking about this, because my album's not really about my kids or having kids. But I think

what has changed is that when I had kids, I thought, “I really want to understand what’s going on inside myself so that it will make me not pass that stuff onto my kids.” More awareness feels like something good to have as a new parent. Working out what was going on for me internally, how my brain was working, how my thought patterns were working, all of that has been used in this record.

On *Confession*, there are songs where it’s unclear if you’re singing about a romantic or platonic connection. Was that on purpose?

It just naturally came about. I was realizing that friendships can be as complicated as romantic relationships. I think we learn about ourselves through other people. I live in a really small community now in rural Victoria, and so I have heaps more contact with my friends here than I did when I was living in places like London and Berlin. I’m seeing these people every day, every week, and if there are tensions or things to be worked through, there’s so much more of an imperative, a motivation to learn to be direct and work things out.

How has being back in Australia impacted the music you’re making now?

Living in a small, remote, rural place, I can afford to have my own studio. I’d previously made my music in my lounge room, in my bedroom. It’s still DIY now, but now I have an offsite space that I can go to, and it feels much more spacious and open.

Yes, I was thinking about “I Go Back” specifically, and that reaction to your immediate environments kind of.

In the first song that I released as a solo artist, I say, “Gums in the bush, I’ve had my fill.” At that point in my life, I just wanted to get out of Australia and experience a bigger world, travel, and meet new people. At this point in my life, I feel really settled and happy to be in one place.

Do you try to avoid outside influences when you write a record?

I do a monthly radio show, so I can’t avoid listening to other people’s music. But to be honest, when I first started the record and I didn’t want to be vulnerable, I was listening to a lot of people’s records. Because I wasn’t using my own ideas as much, I was trying to borrow from other people. It just wasn’t really working. It felt like I couldn’t trust what I was doing because I was using other people’s ideas too much. It can be so helpful to get an idea from someone else’s music that you really like, but there’s a balance with how much you’re choosing to borrow and interpret. You have to find a way to quickly take ownership of the ideas that you’re borrowing, and add your ideas to it so that it feels like your own work.

Does trusting yourself get easier by your fourth album, or is it something that you’re still struggling with?

Maybe this is a really cliché metaphor, but making this album felt like climbing a really big mountain. You start off at the base and have so far to go, without knowing what’s on the other side. You’re slogging your way up. That first year of writing a new album, I felt really insecure, and I didn’t know if I was going to be able to finish it. I had all this mistrust. I finally got to a point where I had a bunch of songs that I really liked, and I trusted myself to finish it. Going down the other side of the mountain feels a lot easier.

How does producing your own records impact your creative process?

I feel like I’m the only one that can create my own sound. I might not have all of the skills that someone else might, but I’m prepared to try a lot of things and take my time to get to the point where I want it to be. I like having control over my sound and what I’m making.

Do you consider how a song will fit into your previous records when you’re writing an album? Are you conscious of any shift in sound?

I’m not really conscious of why I’m being drawn to new sounds. I just follow what’s pleasing me. I really notice

the shift in my preference for sounds in my radio shows as well. It has become more poppy and gentler perhaps. I'm not listening to as much new wave dance kind of music as I was when I was living in Berlin and going out to clubs. That's just not part of my lifestyle anymore.

There's the stereotype of the tortured artist, that if you're settled and stable, as you say, that it's not going to allow creativity to come in. That sounds like it's not the case for you. Was that a fear you had when returning to Australia?

I think it's natural to get to the beginning of every album and say, "What am I going to write about? What do I actually want to talk about? Is there anything here that's worth discussing?" I think that was true when I was living in London, and it's been true since I got back to Australia. I think what's important always is the capacity to show up and to keep working at something. It's not about your lifestyle or what's been happening to you, it's about the tenacity involved in working through bad patches and procrastination. It's such a vital part of having a career in the creative arts, I think.

Do you have any rituals or routines that you do to get into a creative headspace?

No. What's really interesting is that setting the intention of writing something can create the most difficult situations to create something good. Even though I've got this studio space, I found that with this album, a lot of the time I was coming up with my best ideas still at home in my bed. I wrote *Confession* in my head whilst I was giving my kids a bath. It's something about finding that flow state, where you're not putting the pressure on yourself too much to be inventive and creative. You're actually just living your ordinary life and going about your daily rituals, and those can be the moments where the ideas come unimpeded.

Carla Dal Forno recommends:

Doing a puzzle: After finishing *Confession*, I felt like I needed to stop for a while—but I'm not very good at doing nothing. I started buying puzzles from op shops and filling the time that way instead. My favourites are reproductions of paintings; I love looking at the details of each piece—the brushstrokes, the colors. There's also that small, satisfying dopamine hit when you find the right piece. It's a good alternative to scrolling.

Polly Barton – *What Am I, a Deer?*: While doing puzzles, I've been listening to audiobooks, and Polly Barton's *What Am I, a Deer?* has been a favorite this year. The author narrates it herself, and I've really connected with the way she articulates experiences that remind me of dating in my twenties. She interrogates those moments in a way that feels clarifying, like coming to understand your own past a little more clearly. Books that can do this are my favorite type of reading experience.

Isabella Rossellini – *Seduce Me*: The title of *What Am I, a Deer?* comes from a web series by Isabella Rossellini called *Seduce Me*. It explores the mating rituals of different animals and insects, with Rossellini playing each one. It's funny, strange, and informative and I'm enjoying making my way through the series

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