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As told to Mána Taylor, 2302 words.

Tags: Music, Money, Promotion, Privilege, Process, Collaboration.

On the difficulties of balancing the business of art and your creative process

Musician Cassandra Jenkins discusses the financial difficulty of promoting yourself, the power of speaking without cynicism, and creative expression as a need.

Congratulations on your new album! How does it feel for it to be out in the world?

It feels pretty good. It's very freeing and nice to not be holding a secret anymore. And it's funny, because I feel like depending on the day that we talk in an album cycle like this, it's quite a roller coaster and I'm kind of on the downward-what do you call it? Just in that [lower] part of the wave.

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

No, it's fine. It's kind of natural and maybe more interesting, I think, than the sort of dopamine eye of the initial rush, of putting something out into the world—that's in some ways kind of boring.

I imagine it can be really hard, especially when you're promoting something new but you've been working on it for so long. I was wondering if you could talk about—well, you've had a long career so far, and now you have this new album. How does it feel to be a musician right now for you?

It's a little bit confusing. I think some of the optics of being a musician releasing music, in the sort of world and circles that I've been releasing my music in, are rarely very aligned with the reality of a life lived. I spoke with someone really wonderful this morning who's based in Paris, and he was asking me if I weren't a musician what I would do, and I just listed all of my other jobs. I think he found it refreshing, but also surprising that someone in the Pitchfork realm of things would have other jobs besides floating around in their indie space, whatever that is in someone's mind. But the fact is, it's getting harder to make a living doing this. And so in order to be happy, I think I'm going to have to pursue a lot of other things because I'd like to be able to afford to live a more complete life. I'd like to be able to afford therapy. I'd like to be able to afford healthcare, and being a musician rarely puts you in that position.

But I'm really fortunate because I have the great privilege of having a supportive family and a place to live and a house over my head. It's something that I thought I would be able to grow out of before now, but it continues to be something I value more and more as I get older, the security that my family was able to create for me as a kid, despite being artists. Both of my parents are artists, and I think when they were growing up it was a little bit easier to find housing. It was a little bit easier to live a full life and have a career. But yeah, I don't know.

In terms of touring, I think my strategy right now is just to do as little damage as possible, which is a weird position to be in because touring too is such a privilege. People come out to see you, and travel hours to come to your show. It's such an honor to be able to interact with people in that intimate space and to be given that stage. I am just in a place where I wish I could do that without going further into debt.

Yeah, definitely. I definitely think it's especially hard right now. It's funny you were talking with someone from Paris because sometimes I think it's easier to be an artist in Europe.

I wonder. It's hard to know what it's like there versus here. I think the quality of life—it varies from city to city. But I know that the venues in Europe have often treated me very well. Wonderful food, hospitality... really making me feel cared for. Sometimes the venues that I played in the States—you just feel like dirt. But luckily, I'm not really playing those kinds of venues much anymore.

With shows, I was offered a tour around the U.S. and I chopped it in about a third of what it was, [yet] I'm not losing two-thirds more money. It's like the more I tour, the more money I have to lose. That's not a good position to be in. I don't believe that I can continue to invest in something that's not giving me any kind of return, unfortunately, because that cuts me off from getting to meet a lot of wonderful people. I think, the other way you could go about it, is I could tour alone and do it troubadour style and that would be one way to do it affordably. But it's hard to tour alone. I don't like touring alone.

It sounds difficult.

Maybe some of the hardest times I've had on tour have been when I was by myself. It becomes, I mean, one of my newer songs is sort of about that experience and it just becomes harder to laugh at stuff. It's the second track on the record, "Clams Casino." It's sort of about being on tour by myself and finding it really hard to keep my spirits up and eventually reuniting with my band.

That's all really heavy to carry, but also refreshing for me to hear, because I feel like sometimes some musicians are—I don't know how to say it—but are able to compartmentalize it, ignore that it is difficult, and just tour because they think that's their job.

I think I did that for a long time, but at a certain point, you have to prioritize your wellbeing. And if you're not, yeah, I'm kind of over grinning and bearing it when it comes to touring because who am I doing it for at the end of the day?

To switch gears a bit—a lot of your music in your albums have field recordings, which feel like a personal and beautifully intimate window into something. And I'm wondering, what's this relationship you have to recording and capturing moments. Do you record a lot during your day to day?

Yeah, I do. I go in waves. I think I go through periods of having that lens on, and I like having that lens on where I'm really attuned to listening in that way. I have a pair of headphones that I really love that are now discontinued, that record binaurally and actually amplify sound around you in this wonderful way. And I just really like practicing deep listening with them on. It's one way that I practice observation and listening. It's like the act of doing it is more important than the product created through doing that.

The act of doing it is the reward there, and then sometimes you end up with a fragment that you hear later and it means something to you, or it sparks a vivid memory. I think certain ones you can listen back on and they have a potency to them. For me, it's a matter of using my own discernment as a filter for what I feel like sharing with other people. I think that discernment came from a visual arts practice and going to art school and being in an environment that was very discussion and critique oriented. I just really carried that with me. And it's sort of my discerning ear that is the only filter that I have when it comes to the world around me and recording it.

A lot of the most memorable to me are on the song "Hard Drive" from your first album, where you have this security guard talking and then the most recent song "Betelgeuse" with your mom. They both kind of have this cosmic theme in a way. And from the internet, I know you're into birding and you're also really into astronomy and stuff like that. So it's really cool to hear. It's almost like seeing the way you see both things in the sky, birds and cosmos.

It's also one of the threads between those two recordings, which I hadn't thought of side-by-side when I was making those tracks, but I like that there are these older women who are talking about something very sincerely, and I don't think we have a lot of spaces for people to do that. I feel like a lot of the media that we're surrounded by now is very self-conscious. With that, we sort of lose an earnestness of communication that I think is really important to hear. It's important to hear that voice that has no trace of cynicism. It's hard for me to have that kind of a voice. I feel like I have to frame everything I say in a certain awareness of its context, but to hear people speak freely and passionately about something so universal is a beautiful thing to be able to share with other people. And again, I'm less capable of doing that myself. So I look to others to help me communicate things that I know deeply and feel strongly about, but have a hard time communicating.

In that vein, with the lyrics that you write, is it something that you work on slowly? What is your process like with words?

I do write very slowly. I usually start with a few brush strokes and I mean, I think about it more like clay actually than I do a canvas: Start with a slab and slowly whittle it down and edit it and change its shape so many times before it feels like it reveals itself. I'm always looking for cues for what something wants to be. I rarely go at it with a finished idea in mind, like a concept in mind. I get pretty bored pretty quickly if I'm just simply executing an idea that I've had. When it becomes execution, it loses its spark for me.

Songwriting has to be a sort of series of discoveries for it to sustain my interest. And that for me happens in the form of editing a lot of the time, rewriting, editing down until it feels right. Again, it comes back to that idea of discernment. There's no rule, there are no rules really. There are devices, and I think the longer you work at something, the more you can learn techniques and devices that you can apply to something. But it's pretty lawless—songwriting is a pretty lawless terrain, and I have to follow my intuition with all of it. I think that process is different for every song.

I didn't realize that you had gone to art school. How do you view creativity now, as well as your relationship to creating?

I view my relationship to creating as it's becoming more and more of a deep need versus something I do casually. The more my life becomes about the business of art and creation, the more I need to balance that with actually creating something and being in a flow state. Without it, I think my soul would just shrivel up—and I can't have that.

So I feel like when I was shooting that video for "Clams Casino," at the end of the day, I was the happiest I'd been in a really long time because when you're in album cycle mode, a lot of it is trying to share and generate sort of discussion around the thing that you created versus actually creating. Having that oasis of making a music video in the middle of all of that was the first time in many months where a lot of the noise in my head was able to come to a stop and quiet.

The act of creation is one of the key things that will quiet my mind. Otherwise, it's an effort and it's a valuable and valiant effort that I make to quiet my own mind. And I work at it in other ways, too. I just think that creative output is a very joyful and surprising process for growth. And for me, my relationship to creativity is often very collaborative as well. And I don't think that the world at large really favors collaboration, especially the music industry. I think collaboration poses a lot of difficult kinds of circumstances for what something is on paper legally.

With creative ownership, collaboration kind of proposes a lot of complications or a simple arrangement. But for me, my favorite way to work is to work with other people and really create something greater than I can do on my own and to feed off of someone else's creative energy and to give them everything that I can. And so as much as I can, I'm creating with other people, but I think I have to sharpen my pencils on my own in order to bring my best self to those collaborations.

Cassandra Jenkins recommends:

Merlin Bird ID. It's a bird watching app and it's great for anyone just curious about birds. It's good for identifying but it's also a field guide that's worldwide. It's such a beautiful version of a global community.

Making Rice Krispie treats. Making *and* eating them, but I really recommend making them. It's a deeply nostalgic pleasure that one should give oneself.

The Hayden Planetarium. They have a lot of cool events there, a lot of young, cute scientists putting on shows. It's so cool.

Sennheiser Audio Headphones & Tiny camera in the shape of a camera

Wood Thrush Farms. I want to recommend them as a farm that you could support in New York City.

Untitled Flowers: A Radio Show with Adam Sherry

Name

Cassandra Jenkins

Vocation

musician

Fact

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