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As told to Emma Ingrisani, 2671 words.

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# On the value of liking what you make

Musician Christina Billotte ([Slant 6](#), [Autoclave](#), [The Casual Dots](#)) discusses the power of mixtapes, collaborative dynamics, and composing through time and distance.

**How did you first realize that you wanted to be an artist? Were there any early experiences that shaped that?**

My family is kind of artistic. My mother was in plays in New York City, off-Broadway plays, and my dad went to The Art Students League and was really into art. So they kind of raised us with this idea of being an artist, coming from New York City in the '60s. I think my dad first gave me a guitar when I was eight, an acoustic guitar. And I had one record, which was The Beatles double album, the greatest hits. I had a stereo that would play 16, 33, 45, and 78 [rpm], and I would listen to that over and over again on all different speeds, because it was really the only record that I had. And try and play guitar.

So I had this idea from a young age of creating a band, but it wasn't until my early teens that I decided I really wanted to play, and got fanatically into music. After The Beatles it was like—I discovered the radio, and I was into The Police in this sort of ridiculous way where I just would listen to the records like, "Okay. This is the bass. Now I'm listening to the bass. Okay, now I'm listening to the drums, now I'm listening to the singing..." So, yeah, I had a sort of fanatical way of listening to music.

Then, once I met people at school that were going to shows, I was like, "Oh, this is cool. These are people my age and they're actually playing music. I can see how to do this." Then when I saw [Rites of Spring](#) play at Food for Thought, I was like, "Okay, yeah, that's going to be me. I'm gonna be on the stage and I'm going to do this, too."

And my parents' friend gave me a bass, too, when I was 14. That played into it partway.

**How did you develop your voice as a singer? Did that happen later, or around the same time?**

That happened later. I wanted to sing, but I was very shy. I couldn't imagine singing in front of people, but I would do the thing where I'd take a tape recorder and play a bass line on it, and then I would take another tape recorder and play it, and then sing. [Laughs] I'd do that in my room, by myself.

I remember the first time I sang—I sang backups in Hazmat, my first band that actually practiced and played shows. It was the most nerve-wracking thing, but then after that, I was like, "Eh, I could do this. I could be a singer" [Laughs]. We had a singer in that band, but it was the three of us girls playing, writing songs, and then he would come in and sing over things, mostly just at the shows and stuff. And then the next band [[Autoclave](#)] was the one with Mary Timony, and I was like, "I'm going to sing. I'm going to do it. It's not that hard."

**I was interested, especially listening to the Autoclave combined album, in your vocal phrasing. The song "I'll Take You Down," the way there's almost a spoken-word little flourish at the end of the line.**

I did listen to Blondie, because they used to have Blondie on Friday nights, late night on television. So I remember being 10, and hoping that they would play the reruns with Blondie on it. And she does those certain parts of the songs where she talks, so I think that sort of came from there, even though you would never know it.

So, yeah, the Debbie Harry, "Rip Her To Shreds" or something where she's...

Or what's that one song? "I really wanted to go out with you, I laid my heart on the line..." [laughs] or whatever. But, of course, things-trying to translate what I had in my head into what I was doing-it always comes out really different.

**Starting out in the '90s DC punk scene with Hazmat, and then Autoclave and Slant 6, how did that shape your creative process, as a songwriter and as a performer?**

There were a lot of opportunities to play shows, so that was great. With Hazmat, it just always seemed like there was a community center show, or something going on that we could play, even the Wilson Center. And then with Autoclave, people were always asking bands to play.

And then Slant 6—we'd always get asked to play shows, but also just traveling across the country, and we booked the tours ourselves, it seemed really easy at that time. It wasn't this rock club, like, "Oh, you gotta bring in a certain amount of people, and you gotta make this amount of money," or, "You can bring in hundreds of people, but we're only going to pay you \$100." There just wasn't that sort of thing going on at that point in our vein, our scene. Bands-people-were really excited about music and really supportive.

How it influenced my playing? I think the biggest way is just the influences that I got into. There would always be the dollar records at Second Story, and I'd go in and just pick anything that I thought looked good, and I got my own ideas, like I was super into Devo and really into Blondie and into different things, but then the scene—everyone was constantly making mixtapes for each other. So you were getting exposed to all this different music all the time, and you'd find the songs that you thought were great, and it was particular influences for particular years, but you were getting it from a scene of people that were all passing music around and sharing it and listening to it.

**With the mixtapes, were people consciously reaching back or delving into niche genres? What was one thing, or a couple things, that you came across that way?**

Oh, so much stuff, actually. The earlier tapes were '77 punk, a lot of it, and there would be stuff like The Vibrators on it, but then there would be Prince on it. So it was not all one genre, and the mixtapes were more about how the song lined up song to song, and how they made you feel, and the flow of the whole thing.

**It seems as though you've always been decisively maintaining your own path. How did you define your goals and artistic mission? Especially in that scene that had so much going on, with hardcore and the different iterations of punk.**

I don't know. I mean, my goal was to get on the stage and play songs that we wrote, and you constantly make aesthetic decisions, but I was never like, "Okay, I'm going to play this kind of music because I want to fit in with this kind of group," or anything. It was more just what came up when you played with people.

When I played with Melissa [Berkoff], she had this really precise, uptight drumming style and I loved playing with her, but then Mary would come in and she'd just flow something over the songs and it would be a completely different thing all of a sudden. And then Nikki [Chapman] would write some parts. And the same thing with Slant 6, it's like you make choices as you're doing it.

With Slant 6, I do remember being like, "I want to make music that's a little bit more danceable than Autoclave." I didn't go at it with any particular style. But then I was listening to the Wipers all the time. [Slant 6 bassist and co-vocalist] Myra [Power] was listening to the Ramones. And then [drummer] Rachel [Carns]—we wrote a lot of those songs and she put drumbeats to the original ones, and then they were adapted later to what Marge [Marshall] played with a full kit. So I feel like her influence was really big, especially on that first record.

Genre wasn't a word I thought about back then. People started talking about that in the later '90s, and that's when I did Quix\*o\*tic and I was like, "Oh, I want to do something that's genre-less. I want to try, at least." And that was the only thing I went for with that band, was being genre-less.

**When you say "genre-less," how did you resist genre or define that sound?**

That's the thing, I don't know if I was successful or not with Quix\*o\*tic [laughs], but that was just the one thought. I remember thinking, "Yeah, okay, I'm going to do a band that doesn't fit into a genre right now. You can't say this is ska. You can't say this is country. You can't say this is folk. You can't say it's hardcore, whatever, I'm just going to..." But again, it was just a melding of the three of ours' tastes. And I don't necessarily think it was genre-less, and I think lots of new genres or sub-genres have been born since then.

Also, again, a mixtape—there was a Duke Ellington song, a really lo-fi Duke Ellington song that was recorded in, I think in the 1930s at some point, and then later on it was recorded differently. But I just remember the feel of that song, being like, "I kind of want to go towards this feel." What else? And then Sun Ra, that Angels And Demons record, right between the big band and when it crosses over to more free-sounding, I really liked that sound, it had kind of a mystery to it. And then what the other people in the band would listen to. Mixed it all together.

**With The Casual Dots, am I right that you started playing together in 2002, or a little before that?**

It could have been somewhere around the beginning of 2002, where they would come over to my house and we'd go down to the practice space and just jam.

**How do you think that came together, the transition point into a new project?**

It was sort of this unsaid vibe in the air that we're just jamming, we're just playing, keep everything relaxed. And so we would play, and—we'd just make noise. And that happened several times. I remember thinking, "Huh, is this ever going to turn into something? I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen." And then one day, [drummer] Steve [Dore]—it was a mix CD at this point, there was a song on it. I was like, "Why don't we cover this song?" and then we all figured out our parts without even listening to it, I think, and we don't even actually play it the way it's played on the mix CD that he made.

And just from that, it was like we knew how to work with each other all of a sudden. A lot of times they had something down totally, they knew what they were playing, and I would just not know, and I'd play something different all the time. And then when we got to the studio, I actually would just play and then have to go back and learn my parts later to play it live, because I wouldn't remember exactly what I did. So Casual Dots, it was just kind of loose, but we all had aesthetics that blended well together.

It started with the drums. I really like Steve's drumming. I mean, I think it's really exciting. Even the quiet stuff that he does has a lot of feeling to it. And he's really good at bringing the feeling up and down again along with how we're playing. So it would start with that, and then me and [co-guitarist] Kathi [Wilcox] would start playing, and she'd get into a groove of something she liked, and sometimes I would get into a groove with something I liked, and we'd just keep playing it until it morphed into a song. Or sometimes I would never find the part until we recorded. [Laughs]

**I first encountered a song from the first album on a mix CD, and it was just one of those moments where you're like, "What is that? There's something very distinctive about the sound of this song," and I feel like that's a big part of it. That it seems like you're, all three of you, very responsive to each other.**

Yeah, that's what I particularly like about this band.

**How have you written lyrics for The Casual Dots?**

I like to write lyrics live in the practice space. I have a hard time going home and sitting down, which is what I had to do a lot with the second record. Things come out when you're singing in the practice space, and ideas, and even when you're filling in the rest of the vocals, stuff just comes out and makes sense sometimes, and it goes with the energy of the song.

A lot of the first record's lyric writing happened that way, where we just practiced a bunch. So I wouldn't have every single lyric where it was supposed to be, and have different lyrics in the same part sometimes and have to take them apart. I remember deciding to write them all of them down on the way up to New York. And it looked like I just sat there and wrote all the lyrics out, but I hadn't, it was actually things that were fermenting for months.

**With the Sanguine Truth album coming out after an 18-year interim period, what was it like to gather those songs together and put them out into the world?**

To finally get them out? It was a relief, a little bit, to not always be like, "Oh, god, I've got to finish the lyrics for that..." [Laughs] But it was like, we got together and we'd write more songs, and then life would get in the way, and then we'd call each other and be like, "Hey, we should really finish this." And then we'd all go to New York or something and work on it for a couple weeks, and then we'd go back to our lives and forget about it, and then come back and be like, "Wait, wait, we've got to finish this. We've got to do this!" until we just finally got it done.

I was living in LA, Kathi was living in New York, and Steve was living in London, and he's still in London. It's just hard to get together, but when we do get together, there's just a dynamic that happens, and it's really fun, and I don't know if it would be the kind of thing that if you were together all the time—if it would disappear, or it would still be there. It might just be because we get together every few years and start making music and it's fun. Or maybe if we did all live in the same city, we'd make tons and tons of really great records. Who knows? But we don't, so... [Laughs]

**Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

I guess my biggest advice would be—make music that you really like yourself. Don't put stuff out that you don't like yourself. Make music that you would listen to, and then I think it's valuable music. But if you're going for a genre and trying to sound like someone else, then... I don't know. Make sure it's about the music.

Christina Billotte Recommends:

Forever Changes - Love

The Second Time Around - Etta James

Chairs Missing - Wire

Plastic Letters - Blondie

Erik Satie (Vol. 3) - Aldo Ciccolini

Name

Christina Billotte

Vocation


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