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August 24, 2021 -

As told to Sophie Kemp, 2185 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration.

On documenting everything around you

Musician Claire Rousay discusses finding inspiration in the mundane, the part of her practice that's just for her, and paying attention to things that are otherwise rejected or ignored.

Tell me a little bit about mundanity as a part of your artistic practice. You make music that often involves taking field recordings of yourself washing the dishes, doing housework, breathing intensely when you're anxious. What is appealing to you about that aesthetically?

I like the idea of being able to learn and pay attention to things that are otherwise ignored or kind of almost rejected. I like that within music too: mundane sounds like flipping through a book or walking to the bathroom, washing the dishes or something. I was trained as a percussionist. So a lot of the stuff I do, even if it is textural, I can hear the rhythms in it, and that's what appeals to me. At least on the surface. And then I can dig or manipulate the recording to give it more of a personality. But I'm really interested in the mundane and overlooked aspects of everything, even musically. Which is why I stopped playing the drums and started using other tools that I didn't know how to use as well, because I do really like approaching sound and music and performing as a beginner rather than someone who has established ideas or has mastered something or has a false sense of mastering something.

I really like approaching things with the beginner's mind. Everything is equally important to me right now. I don't really know how to use Ableton Live and I've been using my computer to perform. So panning something from left to right is just as important to me as the whole synth sound. Choosing the synthesizer sound and tweaking it to sound the way you want it, that matters just as much to me as where it's panned. Typically, you should probably care about the synth sound way more than how far it is left or right.

I'm slowly picking up on those things and obsessing them. On the last two records I made, I didn't really know how to use anything. So I was just like, "Ah, fuck it. I'll use the stock sounds. Whatever comes with the computer I'll just use that synth and not even adjust it." And people will be like: "Whoa, what did you use? How did you get the sound?" And I'd be like: "It comes with a MacBook." You just click on it, and it's already fucking in there dude. I think operating that way, you focus on so many things that are typically overlooked and maybe you get a more intimate experience without all those preconceptions that somebody who knows what they're doing gets out of it. So the mundane aspect of that would be picking a synth sound. It's like, "I don't care. Pick one out of a hundred, I'm just going to guess and pick it. And if I like it, I'm not going to change it."

It's more of a holistic and felt experience of making music: the actual process of figuring out how every little part works is important to you.

And communicating the idea that things that other people think are boring or unimportant can be very important. And someone else's measurement of importance and quality is not a universal thing. I feel like everybody should be able to decide what they want and what they like. And this is my way of, I guess, showing that.

What kinds of things outside of the physical process of making music do you think are bleeding into your work right now? Do you identify as someone who has hobbies?

I have a bunch of people in my life who really inspired me to learn more stuff. I haven't always had that. I've in the past really surrounded myself with musicians, and particularly experimental musicians only. Having friends and people that are close to me who are interested in things outside of that world has

actually made my experience in that world even more special. I have some friends here in San Antonio who are a couple, and I knew one of them before. Her partner is kind of a newer friend of mine, but I finally established a relationship with that person and it totally rocks. He got a motorcycle license a year ago and I've been super jealous. So I was like, "Fuck it. I'm going to buy a motorcycle and get my motorcycle license." So I did that recently. I know so much shit about motorcycles now. And I don't necessarily think that's bleeding into the work entirely, but having an interest outside of music that is truly non-musical. I can't really make it into this poetic thing. Now I love ripping around on a fucking bike.

There's also my partner. She is really good at everything. She's one of those people that if you ask her to do something, she can just learn it and know everything about it and then keep that knowledge in her head. So every time we go somewhere, she's like, "I know everything about that thing." And she's like, "Oh, I know what camera that person's using. You can do this, this and this with it." And I'm like, "Oh, that's cool." And she's like, "Oh, did you know what kind of plant that is?" She's like, "Did you know that Redwoods grow in Texas?" Fuck no. How do you know everything? It's really cool seeing other people who have interests outside of just making music that sounds like you're scraping rocks.

Do you feel like you have an intense relationship with the sounds that you kind of hear throughout your life?

I'm overly sentimental. I'm a very sentimental and precious person. Every little thing means so much more to me than it might to somebody else. I have an Ikea lamp in my house and an ex that I had had the same lamp and I have the sound of the click of the lamp being turned on and off recorded. And that sends me back to going to bed in that bed. I'll be like, "Oh really? I'm going to take the lamp sound and that's going to be the thing that transports me back four years." That's dark. The fact that I can hold onto that sound and hear it in my head all the time. I still have the lamp, so when I click it, it's like fuck. I can smell the sheets, I can feel the way the room is. So yeah, I definitely sound like has a lot of sentimental value.

Would you put the IKEA lamp sound in a song?

Oh totally, yeah. Sometimes those emotional aspects of the field recording specifically are really just for me. Unless somebody asks about it, obviously then I'll talk about it. But I'm not going to be like, "this is a piece about the IKEA lamp in this person's bed." You know what I mean? It's just one of those things where it means something to me and I'll use it, and I don't really need to explain myself. But I know it's there and that's what really matters.

It can be fun to have little Easter eggs in your art that are just for you. With the internet, our relationship with sharing things is so weird and fucked up. It's nice to have little private inside jokes with yourself that you don't really intend to share.

Yeah. Everybody has that in their life. People that don't make shit have those things. I think everybody should have something in their life that's just for them. You're an individual. You live your life, nobody else does. So having stuff that's just for you that nobody else can access is important, I think.

What are your favorite things about getting to work with somebody on music?

I guess having an extension of your friendship. I don't really like working with people who I'm not friends with. So it's kind of cool: like you're having a baby together or something. It's really exciting to create something that is outside of both of you, but it's equal parts of both of you. It kind of becomes this one thing. My favorite people to collaborate with are people that also have organizational or obsessive tendencies. Anybody who is really anal about their Google Docs or something like that. I'm like, "Damn, this is a whole other level of collaboration." Just all of our crazy person neurotic tendencies in one. Like you're making a record and the session that you're recording everything is super labeled and really intricately laid out and you're changing all of the colors of each of the tracks to make sure it's cohesive. It has nothing to do with the audio element at all. Small things like that, I liked that part of collaborating because you just get to know somebody better.

I also feel like people who tend to be like that tend to have very specific ways of organizing things, sometimes have kind of a more fun way of going through the world and seeing things.

Yeah well, the other thing is if you are obsessed with control, which I am, being put in situations where you don't have total control, like a collaboration, really pushes your boundaries and you're testing your limits, which is cool because you grow as a person. I have to override that thought in my head to focus on what we're doing. I think it's great, because you're pushing yourself as a person and an artist and a friend, so it's really nice.

It's the holistic thing again of having art be an experience that involves a lot of different things.

Saying that my life is my artwork is not the coolest thing to say. But I do like the opposite way of thinking about it rather. It's not like my art bleeds into my whole life, everything's an art project and everything's a performance. But the other way around where it's the really mundane, stupid shit in your life can also go into your art. Broing down about motorcycles with a 50 year old dude on a motorcycle forum, that could bleed into some aspect of working on something. I also just like the option to kind of decide. Or pick up and put down different things and be like, "this will influence my work today." Or make its way into some part of the creative process. And then other times being like, "No, this is just for me. I don't need to put this in there." Cooking dinner and not recording it, that also rocks.

Does that feel pretty instinctual? You kind of just know when you are like, "I'm going to turn the recording on" versus "I know that I'm going to just cook dinner."

It's almost always on. It's honestly pretty fucked up. I walk around and I always have a recorder and my phone and I'll do laundry and almost every fucking time there's dead batteries in my pockets. I'm always finding batteries and being like "Can you wash batteries? I hope I'm not going to die one day." It's really cool because I'm just constantly documenting things. The only reason I started documenting everything with audio is just because I would never remember to write down. I've never been a diary person or a journal person. It's funny. Are you a journal person?

I am. I am somebody who is compulsively writing things down. Every time I see a weird dude on the subway, I'll pull out my phone and write it down. I have all these notes on my phone that are like: "Weird dude on the subway wearing a Budweiser hat."

I get that way with sound. I started documenting everything with sound because I couldn't write it down. And I guess some people do those pictures. I don't fucking know, whatever. I like sound, and I do feel a little bit invasive when I record people in public, but it's kind of fun.

I always really admire people who do that. Every time I see somebody with a camera just take a picture of somebody that they clearly don't know for their weird art project. I'm like, "That is so fucking weird, but I also respect you."

Right, yeah. There's a line that you definitely can cross doing that kind of shit. But technically my recorder's just in the side pocket of my backpack, microphone side up. It's less of me trying to capture something specifically and trying to get everything.

It's fun to just eat up the whole world.

It's all we have right now, right?

Claire Rousay Recommends:

5 recent virtual hangs i enjoyed

Facetime meeting about a collaborative live set with Jordan Reyes (15:30)

Long overdue facetime with Jacob Wick (17:00)

First time talking with Devin Shaffer using zoom then google hangouts (18:00)

Ritual of beers and gossip with Anne-F Jacques over facetime (18:00)

Weekly marathon facetime with my partner Em (13:00)

Name

Claire Rousay

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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