On telling your own story



Musician Courtney Barnett discusses taking breaks, never totally figuring out how to write a song, and why crippling self-doubt is universal.

July 29, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2154 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Creative anxiety, Collaboration, Focus.

Are you someone who needs to stop working and touring in order to write new music? Since releasing *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit* back in 2015, it feels like you've never stopped going.

I actually did take a break and I think it was useful. When I was touring I did write and think and create little things along the way, but it always feels a bit distracted. When I made an effort to say "no" to touring for a while, I'd sit down at my desk every day and write. I think I need that real focus for things to continue. You can make little segments of songs along the way, but that kind of decisive work of finishing a project needs your full attention.

For a lot of musicians, the balance between touring and being at home can be complicated. Dropping back into your regular life and then getting back into the rhythm of making new things can be weird.

I think it's just part of it. It would be so nice to separate from all those boring aspects of life while you're on the road, but it's also unrealistic. You can't. Well, *maybe* you can, but I guess you'd need someone to take over everything for you while you were away and that would be scary. My life seems like a pretty even balance of those two. I think it's because things have always kind of been, at least for me, very self-run.

When I started making music I was doing all this stuff myself—both the creative side and the admin side. I didn't have anyone helping me with that for quite a while. And then I started my own record label, and over time I eventually got amazing people to help do all that stuff. But it's still ingrained in me that you need to be in control of most of that stuff yourself.

Has your methodology for making music changed much over the years?

I think it's mostly the same, but I do try to learn different tools and explore different methods and experiment with different things. I really try to make the writing process a bit more methodical. You've got to always try different things and grow. Still, I never quite know what I'm doing.

You made a record with Kurt Vile, *Lotta Sea Lice*, that came out last year. What was your takeaway from that experience? Did that collaboration have any kind of lasting effect on your process, moving forward?

Definitely. The whole process was really inspiring. I can never quite figure out why, but I think it was about the balancing of ideas. I really admire Kurt's songwriting and him as a person. We brought in different friends as band members while we worked on it. I think working with a bunch of different people, often with really short notice, helped keep us on our toes.

I've always been such a scared and anxious person and I need to know *exactly* what's going on. Sometimes I think it's good to be thrown into the deep end and just have to see what happens. With all of these different energies floating around, you never knew exactly what was gonna happen… and I think that was good for me. Most importantly, it was fun. We had only intended to record one song, but the whole thing felt so natural that we just went with it. The whole record kind of came out of nowhere.

There's a discursive quality in your songs, which have all of these winding narratives that feel both relatable and honest.

My goal has always been to incorporate every experience, good and bad, and spin it around until it makes something interesting or something useful. I try to draw inspiration from anything and anywhere. You just have to open your eyes. If you're open to people and open to situations, there's always so much more going on around us than we realize.

Has having run your own label—and understanding the particulars of the music business from the other side—been helpful for you as an artist? Even if it's just in terms of managing your expectation for what happens with the things that you make, or how you think about putting out music?

I think it’s good to understand how all that stuff works to a certain extent. I wouldn’t get too involved with the intense manipulation of advertising and that side of it, but it’s good to understand the basics. The creative side is what I try to focus on. I would never want to let my understanding of the business side steer the creative side into trying to make something solely with the goal of it being more successful. That would be bad.

We often get questions from musicians asking things like, “How do I get someone to notice me?” or “Do I need to sign with a record label in order to release my music?” Do a lot of people ask you for advice in that way, or try to send you their music?

I guess a little bit via Milk Records but, yeah, those questions are familiar. That was basically me. I was asking those questions forever, for years. Since I was 18 I was performing original songs and trying to play them in front of people. I was on that quest to be discovered, whatever that means, and I think my desperation kind of out-shined the actual work I was making. I was more interested in the external side of it. After a while I stopped focusing on that and I tried to just focus on making better art. And then, at some point during that process, that’s when it started to go right. In the end you realize that the music and the art and the song is always going to be the most important thing. Who cares about the other stuff?

That’s the hardest thing to tell people sometimes when they’re struggling to be noticed. That’s the thing no one wants to hear: “Just make better art!”

Oh, I know. No one wants to hear that. I didn’t want to hear that. It seems like stupid advice.

During that time when you were struggling as an unknown, trying to write songs and get up in front of people, what sustained you? Was it just the fact that you love doing it? Ultimately, is that the thing that you have to focus on?

I guess so. I mean, it’s also just a kind of forward-propelling motion. There was so much struggle as well. I liked doing it, but it was hard. Maybe that’s what it is: the challenge, and then the satisfaction from when that challenge pays off.

I assume you’ll be spending a lot of this year touring. How do you determine what the right balance for that is, or when it’s okay to say no to a performance opportunity? How difficult is that?

I think that was a really big lesson for me—figuring out that balance. It’s like there are all these things that you ideally want to do, but the reality of the toll it takes on your mental and physical health is also a real thing. Learning how to say no was a big one.

It feels like you could tour the whole world indefinitely, you could play somewhere new every day, and just keep on going around forever. I don’t know how to figure that out. At some point you just have to decide when to stop. I love touring… until I don’t like it. Again, it’s this balance that you have to pay attention to, so it doesn’t turn bad and suddenly you’re going down into a very negative, dark hole.

Is songwriting something you get better at the more you do it? Is it like a muscle that you can continue to develop indefinitely?

I think so. Although, I also think sometimes that the more you learn, the less you know. I feel myself psyching myself out sometimes that I can’t do it again, or can’t write any more good songs, or whatever. Songwriting always feels like such a mystery for me, but it’s probably a good thing that I don’t always know what’s gonna happen. There is no formula or fixed outcome. I think the muscle idea is better. Working hard at something doesn’t mean you get lazy or fall in line. If you keep working at it, even if you feel stuck, you know that you’ll eventually come out of the hole that you’re in. That’s a good lesson to learn.

Are you the kind of person that will just keep plugging away at something until you can get it to work?

I abandon plenty of things. I don’t really have the kind of discipline or patience to always stick with it. Sometimes I come back to things and try them again, but it depends. If the idea itself keeps coming back to you, then I think it’s worth following it because it’s obviously supposed to be created. I just don’t believe in forcing it. It’ll happen.

Do you have any creative rituals around making music?

Not really. I’ve always tried to keep it different. I think the idea of a really solid creative ritual would be terrifying. Like if something is out of place, or if you lose your lucky pen or whatever, then your whole world comes crashing down. I’ve never been superstitious about it. I try to change it up as much as I can because I think that refreshes the process. Dropping into different environments and just focusing different muscles in your brain and constantly changing the story works best for me. I think most of the time in life we’re so used to understanding how things work. You pay more money for the better thing, or the better car or whatever. Those ideas don’t really relate when it comes to art. You don’t always get to understand how it works, so it’s like a constant guessing game. You just have to keep trying.

I love the fact that there’s a song on your record called “Crippling Self-Doubt and a General Lack of Confidence.” It’s refreshing that even the most assured-seeming people struggle with these things. Why is it an important thing to talk about this, and how do you get over it?

I don’t know how to get over it yet. I feel like that will be a long journey. I think it’s good to acknowledge self-doubt—to say that it’s a true feeling and it exists—and maybe *not* to try to get over it. Instead, just let it sit there and be part of the process. When I’m meeting so many other musicians and songwriters on my journeys around the world, especially when I’m talking to songwriters who I really admire, it’s amazing to realize that everyone goes through this. Everyone is insecure. It’s the kind of thing that you would read in a book, some rock-and-roll memoir or something, and brush off as someone trying to inspire you or be fake modest, but it’s true. Everybody has those doubts, and if they don’t, then they’re a psychopath.

Are there certain things that you come back to again and again when you need to be inspired? Or when you need to be reminded of what good songwriting sounds like?

There aren’t really any solid, specific things, but I do try to keep my ears open. I listen to lots of old music and I think it’s good to always remind myself about the power of simplicity. I’ll go back and listen to Leonard Cohen or Joni Mitchell or something, and it’s often just one instrument and one voice creating an amazing song. It reminds me that I don’t necessarily need a lot of stuff to make something great. On the flip side, that can also be kind of overwhelming. It’s like, “Well, it’s been done. What can I possibly do that is better than that?” But maybe that’s not the right kind of attitude to have. I think it’s all useful. The story is a different thing, you know? People keep sharing their stories and everyone relates to them on different levels and through different times. Those people had their own specific stories to tell. You have your own.

Essential Courtney Barnett:

The Double EP: A Sea of Split Peas (2013)

Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit (2015)

Lotta Sea Lice (collaboration with Kurt Vile) (2017)

Tell Me How You Really Feel (2018)

“Avant Gardener”

“Need A Little Time”

Name
Courtney Barnett

Vocation
Musician



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