

On eliminating distractions



Musician Ebba Åsman discusses trusting your ideas, making sense of the world and staying open to exploration

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As told to J. Bennett, 2395 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Focus](#), [Success](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

You're a trombonist and a singer. Are there any similarities in how you approach both of those things?

Yeah. I started playing trombone when I was seven. I've always been singing, but I never saw it as something I do, if you know what I mean. I never saw myself as a singer. I saw myself as a trombone player. But I realized quite a few years later, when I quit the conservatory, that I use a lot of my vocals to come closer to my own musicality. So, I started to incorporate them into my practice on the trombone and started to meld them together into one voice. Now, when I compose and write music, I use my voice a lot. And when I play, I try to think, phrasing-wise and melodically, as I sing.

Your new album, *When You Know*, is the first time you've sung on one of your records. Why was that important for you to do?

For me, it came very naturally. I've always written, and I've always had a diary and I've always expressed myself through writing—but only very personally for myself. Going into this process, I felt very lost in a way. I needed to try to make sense of my own feelings and navigate through what I was going through to try to make sense of it. I'm actually in the cabin where I wrote the album now.

That cabin is a crucial part of this album.

Yeah. When I came here, it was a very natural part of the process to also write down my thoughts. And they kind of naturally became lyrics since I wanted to be very open. So, I incorporated my singing into this record from the beginning, and it felt very natural. When it came time to release it, I realized, okay, now I'm really singing and it's really very personal lyrics. But, like I said, I just needed to do it.

I can't imagine it was an easy decision to share personal thoughts from your diary with the public.

For me, when I'm in the process, it's very intimate. I'm really putting my inner thoughts and my big questions about life and what I'm going through. But then when it's done or I've recorded most of it, then I feel like I kind of have to let go of it in a way because then I involve my producer in Berlin. Then I have to be chill about it, because I also want to be vulnerable in my music. It's a very important part. And I also think that's what makes it for me, something I have to do.

You isolated yourself in that cabin for a month to write this record—no internet, no social media, no TV. And in freezing cold temperatures as well. Why did you decide to write that way?

I think I was questioning where I was going. I didn't really know the direction I wanted to go in, and I was

trying to navigate my own feelings, and I was just all over the place. I felt like I wanted to just come to a place where I could just clear out all the noise. I live in Stockholm usually, and everyday life is so high paced there. It's social media and email everywhere. But I'm from the countryside originally, so I've always had that kind of longing. I felt like I really needed to be here and be in a bubble and just come closer to myself and my feelings and try to sort it out.

I was here for a month in January, and it was one of the coldest winters I've experienced. This cabin is by the mountains, and it's quite close to Norway. If it's, I don't know, minus five or minus 10 [Celsius] in Stockholm, it's like minus 30 here. It gets really cold. And this winter it was steadily minus 30 like every day. So, it was very extreme. I don't think I realized it until I was here, how extreme it was. For me, it felt like everything just got quiet and I could hear my own thoughts. It feels like I'm living 100 years ago or something, and my main problems during the day was like, "There's no water" or "The fire is about to burn out. I need more wood."

The fuses would pop every day, and it would be so dark. I'd try to find my headlamp. So yes, it was very extreme. But I think I also found a calm in that, because it felt like normal stress levels that we had hundreds of years ago. It was about really basic needs: I needed to be warm, so I needed to make sure that I could light a fire. The water was running just one to two hours per day and then got frozen during the night so, when it was running, I needed to make sure that I filled every bottle so I could cook. But I felt like I kind of thrived in that environment because I felt like I could do so much more than I knew that I could.

I didn't use my telephone at all. I only used my laptop for the music, and there's no TV here. There's just an old radio. That really cleared out the noise in a way that I wanted. I could really just focus on what I wanted to do.

Beyond the increased focus, how do you think your music benefited from the isolation?

I think I came closer to my thoughts. I could evaluate more. Usually, I have a podcast or music on all the time, but now when I was cooking, I might get an idea or a thought that maybe I never could have reached if I wasn't having this ongoing dialogue with myself.

I know you did a lot of reading and cooking while you were writing. Did it all kind of become one process?

Yeah, I would say so. If I would write in my journal, I would write something and then I would think about what I wrote, and that's something that I don't do in Stockholm, when it's maybe more like, "Oh, I need to write this down," and then I let it go, and then I do something, or get caught up in something. But here, it was so slow paced, and I had no one to talk to. I didn't even want anyone to call me during this month, so I only talked to myself.

I understand that you also went snowboarding to reflect on your ideas.

Yeah. We have a mountain just at the side here, so it takes two minutes by car to go to the slopes. Almost every day I would go there and listen to my demos while snowboarding. It was just a really nice way to leave my little nest and do something completely different while listening to what I was doing. It's also just a really nice way of living. I love snowboarding—I've been doing it since I was six or seven.

Have you ever isolated yourself like this to make music before?

Not in this extreme way, but I've always been kind of like a lone wolf. I like to create by myself. I've also traveled a lot by myself and have had similar experiences where I gained more trust in myself because I realized that I can accomplish so much more than I could have imagined.

One of your goals with this record was to break away from the confines of jazz. Why was it important for you to get away from what you'd been doing in the past?

I think it had a lot to do with being honest with my ideas and being honest with what I like the most. In the beginning, I was really practicing a lot and studying jazz very deeply. I have so much love for jazz music. But I also felt like when I started to explore what I like, and obviously having what I learned somewhere in the back of my head still, I got a little bit further away from jazz. And I think I just wanted to take that seriously.

I've always liked so many different kinds of music, and I've always wanted to explore my own way of expressing myself. And I also listen a lot to people that use jazz as a basis and then explore other genres. For me, that's a huge part of what jazz is—freedom. And having the mindset of doing whatever you want and exploring yourself. It doesn't necessarily have to fit in one of those historical boxes.

You studied jazz at a conservatory in Rotterdam. How did you arrive at the conclusion that jazz is more of a mindset than a genre?

One of my absolute biggest idols is Miles Davis. If you look at his life, where he started and how he developed during his career, there is so much progress in his music and how he views jazz and how he wants to express himself. And I just think that's the whole purpose: To keep exploring.

I quit the conservatory mostly because I felt it too narrow. It was just rules and right and wrong, and the goal was to kind of mimic how the jazz heroes do it. And that's a great way to learn. But I think if you get stuck there, then you'll never get close to your own ideas.

Even though you quit the conservatory, are you glad that you had the experience there? Or do you think it was a waste of time?

No, I think it was important. I think it's a blessing to know the theory and know how things developed historically to end up where we are, and to really dig deep into jazz. No, I don't regret it. But I also don't regret quitting it. When I got home to Stockholm after the conservatory in Rotterdam, I started to write my previous album, *Be Free*. It was really my liberation from the conservatory mindset. And it was the beginning of me trying to think about why I like certain things. It was an important milestone that got me to writing this album now, and daring to be even a little further down my own lane.

It seems like the path that you're on is very much one of self-analysis, looking at where your feelings and thoughts are taking you. Does that sound right?

Yeah. I think the main point of my own music is that I want to be as honest to myself as possible. But I also am very open to what can develop from that. I don't want to be put in a box or restrict myself into, like, "This is what I'm going to do now."

Are you already thinking about what you're going to do for your next record and how you're going to make it different from this one?

It's interesting because I'm a really periodic person. I can be in a very creative state, and then it's kind of mellow for some months, where I'm just kind of processing and also trying to have new memories and live my life. Then out of nowhere, it comes again. But yeah, I've been starting to kind of envision a little bit, but I think I'm on a path now where I feel really, really honest to myself. This album that I dropped is really close to my heart, so I think the next album will be in the same area.

You mentioned your last album, *Be Free*, which was nominated for a Swedish Grammi. On the one hand, that seems like an honor. On the other, it seems like maybe it could create pressure that you don't need in your life. How did it affect you?

Because I've been a musician for my whole adult life, being nominated for a Grammi was kind of validating, that I'm doing something valuable. That it was worth to put more of my heart into.

It didn't create any pressure for this new album?

No, I didn't think about it. For me, *Be Free* was so far away from where I was when I was nominated, so I felt like I was already on a completely new path with the next record.

You've played in bands, and you've written music alone. What do you see as the pros and cons of collaboration versus total creative control?

I think I still have some exploring to do, but I really liked the process of this album because I started here and I did pre-productions of all the songs. I wrote the keys and the bass lines how I want them, made the beats and the vibe that I wanted. And then I recorded trombone and vocals. So, when I sent it to [producer] Lucy [Liebe] in Berlin, she already had a quite clear idea of where I wanted it to go. And honestly, I really liked to be here by myself and do that, and really trust that even though I'm not a bass player, I still hear what I want the bass to do. I trusted my own ideas. Because if I would've been in a room with other musicians, I'm a bit of a people pleaser. So, I think maybe my ideas wouldn't have come across or I wouldn't have trusted them in the same way.

I recorded my first record when I was a child, about 18 or 19. We did it in a studio with other musicians, and I really looked up to everyone in the room. I remember I was always like, "Yeah, your idea is better. No, you do your thing here." And I didn't hear myself at all on that record. And then it built a little bit to the next record that I was trusting myself more. But on this record, it's really my ideas and I'm really proud of it.

Ebba Asman recommends:

Patti Smith - *Just Kids*

Erykah Badu - "Bag Lady"

The Internet - Ego Death

Fight Club

Miles Davis - "Moon Dreams"

Name

Ebba Åsman

Vocation

musician

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