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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 1983 words.

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On exploring new territory without losing yourself

Musician and songwriter Jessica Pratt discusses humility, live performance, and holding onto your voice.

How was preparing for this tour versus previous albums?

It was different and the same in certain ways. The music still has to revolve around the voice and guitar but now we have bass and drums. It's a standard sort of rock sound. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but we didn't want it to be boring or super conventional sounding. We tried to replicate what's on the record to some extent with the percussionist doing spacious Brazilian-influence parts in this atmospheric way. We've added a saxophone player, a bit of a wild card. It took a second to situate everything and make sure we weren't overloading the songs. The people in the band are super tasteful players and very skillful. It took a while, though. If you've never had a band and you've been playing live music for quite some time, there's certainly an adjustment that has to be made. It feels pretty natural now.

You've primarily been alone on stage prior to this.

There's a power to playing by yourself because there's a lot of control. The addition of layers of sound, bass, horns, and keys swirling around the melodies can lift things up in a way that is just not possible by yourself. Part of the intriguing thing about playing music is hinting at things that aren't there but you can hear in your mind. To cross over to trying to produce those once imagined sounds with an actual player, I wanted to be careful. It does feel powerful. I understand why people get attached to this way of playing. Also, just playing with musicians who play really well. It's very fun. I think there's a cynical part of me that doesn't want to get distracted by having fun and have that take precedence over delivering the music in the most correct way. I think we've found the fusion of those two things with this band. It's exciting and it feels good, but it's not overcompensating or stamping out some of the subtleties of the music.

How did you find your singing voice?

There are a few things that happened. One, I think some people are naturally predisposed to experiment with those things and be aware of the sound of their voice. I always sang when I was a little kid and didn't stop. Listening to music in your room, you sing along with it. To some extent, I did have a certain kind of voice that naturally occurred to me to sing through, even though that may have shifted slightly over time. Just as far as being a preteen and listening to certain kinds of music and that slightly influencing your phrasing until over time you settle on some sort of natural amalgamation of all of your influences. But then also finding your true voice, whatever that means.

I grew up in a pretty funny family. My brother was really into comedy, and my mom was pretty funny. She was always doing voices and stuff, we watched a lot of funny movies. She was into *The Simpsons* and *MST3K*. That was a big thing for us. Especially if you have an older brother, you're trying to impress them or trying to be as funny as you can and catch up. That's something that has stayed with me.

Maybe there are vaguely comical aspects to the way that some of my music sounds. I don't know. If you think about Ween or something, some of their songs are simultaneously very emotionally affecting, and also there's this weird recurrence of humor or just oddness. I really like the fusion of those two things. Like

The Mothers of Invention, the early Zappa stuff, which is also a fusion of those two worlds of beautiful melodies and sounds, but also humorous. Being mercilessly self-serious is probably not always good for being creative. Maybe sometimes. There are probably some people who do that well. It's good to have some humility.

Do you feel internal or external pressure to produce work at a certain pace?

Yes to both. Despite knowing that taking a decent amount of time is what seems to produce the best work, I still feel slight pressure to change that. From my own selfishness, wanting to create more in a shorter period of time. You're only alive for so long or have a career for so long, and also maybe your voice changes over time. I find the idea appealing of being able to be... not prolific, but releasing records sooner than once every five years because that does add up. Labels always want you to produce as much as you can for them to promote. That's just the way they work. It's a business. The more they have to work with, the better it is in their eyes. I'm lucky enough to work with people that understand the game that I'm playing and that it's just either going to happen or not. For instance, the record came out this year. I would rather not wait five years to put out another record.

I heard Ezra Koenig talk about this where it's like you put out the record, you spend a year plus touring, then you have to settle back in and find yourself creatively and start writing again. It's only so quickly that you can do all of that, but I would like to be a little quicker on a personal level. There are modern aspects of the music industry that are pushing people to try to produce more and play into the algorithmic stuff. It's a shame, but I don't think that everyone is falling prey to that.

What do you need in order to write a song?

Having a solid homestead and feeling to some extent that there isn't a ton of shit on the horizon that's barreling down on me, which is a luxury. Having an open space in front of you. I've never been able to write while traveling or being elsewhere. I seem to not be able to focus very well. I did one residency and I produced very, very little, if not nothing.

As far as the actual conditions of where I'm writing, it's not terribly important. It can be pretty basic, just a room with a door where I can not be heard by other people. As long as it's comfortable and I can focus and not be heard by other people, that's important.

Do you tend to revisit older ideas?

I haven't had much success with revisiting old material. Maybe once or twice, but if it's good, it's good. If it's not, it tends to just not be brought up again. It all happens very quickly. I'll usually get an idea and if it's working, the song will be mostly there in a couple of hours.

You've spoken before about using characters in songs as a vessel for your emotions. Do you have any recurring characters across albums?

I don't think I have recurring characters album to album. In fact, I would say previous to this record, the characters that are cropping up were a lot more vague. You know when you have a dream and you're like, "I was the mailman, but I was also me?" Part of your creative ego is there. But then there's these weird edges to it that might represent something else. It can even change throughout a song. It's different voices coming in, but it's all part of the same cohesive thrust. This new record is a little more defined. Still playing off of that idea of it's part you, part someone else, but with more distinct characters coming in briefly for a line or two.

What allowed for that definition?

I'm not sure exactly why it happened. Maybe it's just the longer you're making music, especially music that is received by the public, which in turn makes you think more about what things mean and how they fit together. As much as you try to keep those thoughts at bay, they do encroach. It's also writing songs for a long enough time where certain aspects become more defined or solidified. Thinking of an album as a whole encourages you to consider certain themes. Whereas previously the way I would write music was a combination of being very engaged and very detached at the same time, more like channeling. It still feels that way, but there's a little more room for the intellectualization of that experience and what the songs are about.

Do you try to move away from your go-to songwriting habits/tricks or embrace them?

It's good to try to not retread the same territory in exactly the same way over and over. It can feel uninspired and be uninspiring for both the audience and you. Part of what makes playing live music a useful tool is that you are revisiting your material every night in this intimate way. You are understanding the things that you do, the patterns that you have, and that's very educational. It can even make you grow tired of some of that stuff, or at least not want to do it again. You want to excite yourself. It's a delicate balance of pushing yourself into new territory and experimenting more without forcing novelty in a way that feels inorganic. You don't want to lose the primal aspects of your music that people respond to.

What is your music vocabulary like?

I have very little theory in my head. I have standard terminologies that I can tap into. As far as

describing how to play something in the way that somebody who has learned a lot about music can, I don't have that language available to me. It hasn't been a problem. I feel like a combination of musical references and using poetic directives does really get through to people. The music is emotional and intuitive. If you take that same approach with how you get people to play on the songs, then it connects. There are times I wish I could just tell someone exactly what I wanted or play exactly what I wanted. Limitations can be fruitful creatively as well.

Do you keep the end listener in mind?

It does occur to me. Again, it's balancing all this information. There's no way to forget that there will be people on the other side listening to the music, which is both a good and bad thing. It can make you feel insecure, but also push you to do things you might otherwise not. Ultimately it's using myself as an audience. What would I like? What would I find interesting? Does this feel lazy or uninspired, or is it rehashing what I've done before?

You've likened songwriting to daydreaming. Do you keep track of your dreams?

Yes. I grew up with a mother and a great-grandmother who were both interested in that. As a result of being aware of dreams I was more aware of my own. I've kept dream journals for a long time, but mainly within a regular journal because I don't have crazy dreams every night. It's just if something interesting crops up, I'll write it down. I think the part of your unconscious brain that dreams come from feels relevant to the part of your brain that songs come from. It feels inherently important to me, but it's just a passing feeling. Dreams can be interesting and I think that you can take a lot of inspiration from them, but it's not something I dwell on necessarily.

Jessica Pratt Recommends:

Lagunitas Hoppy Refresher N.A. Sparkling Hop Water

The Muji 0.5 Pen

Mystery Science Theatre 3000: The Final Sacrifice

Sitting beneath the old oak tree

Sundance Co-op in Eugene, OR

Name

Jessica Pratt

Vocation

musician and songwriter

Fact

Samuel Hess

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1