On holding onto joy



Musician Julianna Barwick discusses the value of slowing down, what a collaboration can teach you, and learning to say no.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2487 words.

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You've been actively trying to slow your album cycle down. What led to wanting a change of pace?

From 2007 to 2020 I've had a quick succession of releases. I was on tour for at least a year with both my 2013 and 2016 albums including special performances, collaborations, working with dance companies, or making music for festivals. I lived in New York for almost 16 years and moved out to LA about five and a half years ago.

Since I was a kid I have always wanted to do film scores. Getting into that earnestly meant slowing down the album cycle. Also, getting a little older and traveling with 150 pounds of gear on your body is different. I wanted to focus on studio projects in between albums. Oftentimes you make a record, that takes a while, you tour it, and a couple of years have gone by.

Is working on a film score a slower process than an album?

I would say so. I usually work quickly when making records. I don't compose anything ahead of time or write music out. It's very much rooted in improv, messing around with my vocal pedal, or sitting down to the piano. Something sticking and then building on top of that is how I've always worked. Film is a bit different because you're collaborating with the director.

Despite growing up singing, you chose to not pursue music in college. How has that decision impacted your practice?

Not doing music in college was a very conscious decision. I was in choirs all the way from elementary school, took private voice in high school, and was in an opera chorus. Always learning music. My dad also taught me dark room photography in our bathroom which he learned from my grandpa.

When I had to decide what I'd focus on in college, I was like, "I don't want to dread making music." I don't want to be like, "Ugh, I have something due on Monday. I can't do this fun thing I want to do this weekend." I've never wanted dread or boredom to enter the picture. I've been making up little songs my whole life. It's always been in me, always been such a joy and an emotional release. I never, ever wanted to dread that.

My approach to photography is completely different. My goal is to create a perfectly composed, contrasted portrait. It's all about lining everything up technically. With music it's trying stuff, being excited about whatever ends up happening. Taking a portrait of someone, I know exactly what I want it to look like. How to frame it, what film to use, millions of decisions. It's more of a practical approach. With music, it's always for the joy of it. I'm proud of my younger self for thinking of it that way. It really could have changed things if I had to laboriously create music in college.

How do you ensure that joy stays in the equation as a musician?

I've gotten better about saying no. For a long time, you're hustling, taking any cool opportunities that come your way. After a while, especially the last two years, if I'm asked to do something, it's in my gut instantly where I can say, "I'm not going to enjoy doing that," or, "I'm going to have the best time doing that. I can't wait." It's pretty instantaneous.

It's about feeling more comfortable saying no—it's not worth it to say yes because you don't want to hurt anybody's feelings or let anybody down. It's not worth it to do something you know you're not going to enjoy. It would do a disservice to the project. If your heart's not in it, it's not good for anybody.

In 2020 you did a livestream presented by Nissan. How do you navigate working with larger companies?

That live stream was my bread and butter of 2020 because of the pandemic. I had played two shows that year. One was a Bernie benefit and one was for a friend. When that came along, I was stoked because I hadn't made any money all year. I know people grapple with associating yourself with big brands but this out of total necessity. Also it was with one of my best friends (Mary Lattimore) in a forest in Oregon so I was like, "That's Cool."

You've consistently worked alongside a diverse cast of musicians. What does a successful collaboration look like?

I've gotten really lucky. The first one I can think of was with Roberto (Helado Negro). I owe a lot to him. He hit me up through MySpace in 2009 and was like, "Your music is dope." That's how we met. He asked me to open for him at the Knitting Factory and then showed my music to his people at Asthmatic Kitty. That led to the record I did with them. They had the idea for us to do a record together that ended up being Ombre.

I consider that my first real collaboration. Up to that point, it was 100% bedroom recordings, no one listening or looking. That was a dream, Roberto was the best. In 2011, Alex Summers hit me up. He was like, "I love your music, would you want to do something together in Iceland?" I was like, "This is the best email I've ever gotten." It was the fastest I've ever responded to an email.

In 2012 I got fully out of my bedroom recording zone and went to Iceland to record with Alex. I would go to his house in the morning and just jam upstairs while he'd be downstairs listening. That was a whole new thing, having someone listening to what I was doing. It took some getting used to, but Alex was the perfect person for me to have that experience with for the first time.

It ended up being life changing, and we're best friends forever. That record means so much. After that, I was super open to collaboration. My M.O. is to improv and see what comes up. With Roberto, it was a bit more thought out.

Are you comfortable with someone saying, 'hey why don't we try this instead'?

It takes some patience for me. I'm such a quick worker, almost an instant gratification thing. Working on something I'll say, "Oh, this sounds cool, I can just put more reverb instead of doing another take." Working with different people taught me that using a nice mic has its value. There's a reason for it. With Alex, I did so much vocal looping. I would make a loop and then we'd listen to it. Sometimes he'd make me do it over again because it wasn't in a key. It was a drag, but it needed to be done. If we were going to play over it, it had to be in the right key.

I had to learn the value of that. With my other records, it didn't matter. I listen back to those and I can tell I played tracks over some vocal loops where I can hear that it's not quite there pitch wise. I didn't even realize that you could not be in a key until I made music with Alex.

You were being encouraged to listen in a different way.

Definitely. I had been so insular, nobody looking or listening. Even having one person looking and listening was totally different but it led me to working well with others. It truly came in handy for so many of my favorite projects I've done.

Do you work well with parameters/communication in advance?

Jamming with people is a completely different thing than scoring. When I jam with people, I like to get right into it and see what happens. If it's not working, or we need to talk it out before, that's cool, too. With scoring I respond very well to lots and lots of directions. It wastes less time for everybody. It's their film, their vision, and the more direction and visualization they can convey to me the better. Outside of scoring I don't respond well to that—direction or authority, in all areas of my life.

How do you prepare for a live performance? Are you relearning your own material?

I've had to do it with every album cycle of every tour. You make the music in the moment and then have to learn how to play your own songs. With this last album, performing 'Inspirit' was a nightmare for a while. I thought, "Oh my gosh, I have no idea what the vocal setting is." For hours, I was messing around like, "Okay, I know there's harmony, delay, reverb, what did I do? I can't figure it out." I always have a little notebook I'm jotting things down in, but I'm not always writing down really important stuff like settings and names of things.

By some miracle as I was preparing for a show, I was going through that notebook and saw I had written something in Sharpie on the other side of the paper. You could barely make it out. I had written down the exact setting for the vocal. I had zero memory of doing that. I have my cheat sheet with me on stage, a roadmap of sorts.

What about teaching your songs to other players, singers etc?

I've learned how to be in teacher mode to have a good show. So many experiences in the past few years have taken me completely out of my comfort zone. In the end it's all worked out. I've had to become more assertive in leading in those circumstances. I sang on my friend Natasha's record a couple years ago. I was in the studio with her and was blown away. She's just got this wonderful command of her surroundings. Just so confident and pro. Even after all this time, I don't feel that. I don't always feel in command of my surroundings, but I do my best.

How do you take care of your voice?

The only thing I've done since the beginning is sugar free menthol halls. It's probably psychosomatic at this point. It lubricates my throat and the menthol clears everything up. I did start a new thing on this last tour. I saw that Brandy recommended a hard candy called ginger honey crystals. She was like, "I swear by these." I'm like, "It's Brandy. I'm going to try whatever Brandy says works for her." It's literally dehydrated ginger and honey. You just stir it into hot water. It really did make a difference. I'm a believer.

You've taken a slow and steady approach to using additional pedals, instruments, etc. How has knowing your gear intimately helped you?

My machines are my best friends because I'm not an acoustic guitar playing singer-songwriter. Things have to be working and I have to know them like the back of my hand. I've been using an RC50 Looper since 2006. I have three of them. I tried a different looper one time. The first time I used it live, it accidentally fell off my little table and broke. I had to play this weird loopless show. It was horrible.

Your music stems from a deeply emotional place. Are you always able to get there when performing?

I just did my first tour in six years and it's different every night. Some nights you're doing your set list and you're feeling it, but maybe you're not 'crazy' feeling it. Then there are other nights, like when I played in Brooklyn on this last tour and a whole bunch of my friends were there, my home of 16 years. It just meant so much. The show was so emotional. That's a gift when that happens. I would never say that happens every single

night, but you play the song. The environment totally changes it - who's going to be there, who isn't there, who can't ever be there again.

Can you feel it coming on?

Definitely. It's almost trance-like. You're performing and connecting to the songs, but you're also having this whole other running thought process, which goes from the absolute mundane to I'm hungry to anything else. The emotion part of it could strike at any moment depending on the place and the meaning.

When an idea is coming on, what's your first move?

Sometimes I'll wake up with a melody and I'll sing it into a voice memo. One element of a song that's on *Will* from was me singing in this reverberant marble tunnel under a train track. Besides those random voice memo moments, it's plugging everything in at home and seeing what happens. I also have my childhood piano, my upright at home. I'm so emotionally connected to that thing. Every time I sit down to play something something comes out magically.

How do you keep snippets of ideas organized?

There have been many demos for things that didn't come to be or aborted projects. I have millions of pieces of things from over the years, but there is absolutely no organization whatsoever, which is crazy. I usually type something in the finder window and hope for the best. You'd think after being robbed in 2014 on tour and losing everything ,even stems and waves from making records, that I'd be more organized, but I'm definitely not.

When did you become aware of the power of the human voice?

Church. No doubt about it. I grew up in Louisiana. My dad was the youth minister at the Church of Christ. We sang as a congregation from song books. It wasn't a church choir situation. It was the whole congregation. Totally acapella. My mom is a beautiful singer. She was in this group called True Life Singers. I found one of their records a couple years ago. It's insane. She has this amazing soprano voice. She was one of six people in this group that recorded acapella poems.

I was hearing that three times a week and more from birth. It went all the way from peppy songs with clapping to mournful emotional hymns. I would tear up because it was just so beautiful. As a little kid, I felt the auditorium was the most gigantic thing in the world. There was a ring to it, a little bit of reverb. I was informed by that from birth. I was moved even as a tiny kid by these beautiful, slow, gorgeous hymns with stacked harmonies. Hearing my mom sing it right next to me was heaven.

Julianna Barwick Recommends:

prince of peace ginger honey crystals

bic mechanical pencils and watercolor paper (for drawing)

nutritional yeast flakes

wonder valley hinoki oil

Aroy-D Coconut Milk

Name
Julianna Barwick

Vocation
musician

Jen Medina