On refusing to censor yourself

Musician Katie Gavin (MUNA) discusses taking care of her mental health to help her art, letting go of market demands with her solo project, and empowering the next wave of queer artists.

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As told to Jess Focht, 1972 words.

Tags: Music, Mental health, Independence, Creative anxiety, Success, Politics.

You've built such an amazing career with your band, MUNA, and now you've been able to step aside and do your own thing, too. How long have you been interested in doing a solo project?

[The solo project] was formulated in 2020, so it's been almost five years in the making. It wasn't ever really about wanting to be a solo artist. It's been more about wanting these songs that didn't work for MUNA to still have a place and be able to be released. I had some friends during the pandemic who knew the songs well and were supportive of them. They'd be like, "Why don't we work on arranging some of these?" That's how it got started. Then it took a backseat when MUNA had its last album cycle because that was fortunately such a big and successful cycle. Then I returned to the project after that.

I think a lot of artists were trying to figure out what to do with their free time during COVID. Is solitude part of your songwriting process? Did you learn more about your creative process during that time of solitude?

1000%. I am usually alone when I'm writing songs—when I'm writing the lyrics and the top line of songs and shaping them, feeling out what they're going to be. I recently went on a solo trip a couple of weekends ago to the mountains outside of LA. When I told my friends, they were like, "You went by yourself?" For me, as a writer, I don't ever really feel like I'm by myself because I'm hanging out with my different ideas. A lot of times I prefer it to hanging out with other people. I think I need a lot of time on my own.

But that being said, during the pandemic, I resisted creativity a lot. Maybe because what was going on was just so intense that I didn't want to sit down and write about it. I went completely insane with yard work and did everything I could to avoid songwriting. But that just happens sometimes.

Do you have any other creative outlets aside from songwriting? Yard work can be creative!

I would say my life has been pretty unbalanced in terms of work and hobbies. But in general, I champion having other creative pursuits. I do *The Artist's Way* once every couple of years and always pick up something. I really love gardening and native plants, and I hope that I don't give up on that. I think as I get older, I'll probably become more and more of a gardening lady.

It's not really creative, but I rollerblade and I skate. I skate-dance sometimes, which has interacted with the music because it makes me want to write stuff that people can skate to.

Your solo album is one of my favorites of the last year, and I love that it has so much folk and country influence. Do you feel like you had more creative freedom with this project, writing without a genre in mind?

I think there are times with MUNA where we'll look at our demos and we'll say, "Wow, everything is in this range of BPM, mid-tempo songs, so we need to write an up-tempo banger." We start filling in the blanks when we're making an album. But I think the solo record felt like a good space for me creatively to feel like I can say and do whatever I want—that it doesn't have to be scalable to a certain size. The songs don't have to be big; they don't have to be relatable to every person. They don't have to be consumable. I doubt you're going to hear my song about my dog dying in the Rite Aid, but I don't care. I think it was just really good for me to have a space where I could do whatever. But then it naturally did take this folk songwriter turn, that just happened without really thinking about it consciously.

I was in the All Things Go Music Festival crowd when you gave Chappell Roan, who had dropped out the day before, a shout-out. How do you think creativity and mental health are intertwined as a working artist in the world? I feel like there's a mental health focus in your music, too. Over years of songwriting, you can see more of that.

Yeah, it's really sweet. I've seen some fans put some of the earlier MUNA songs and later MUNA songs back to back and say, "I can't believe this is the same person who wrote this." It's funny because from my perspective, it's absolutely the same person. I still have some of those thoughts.

I'm really on the side of taking care of your mental health. It does nothing but help your art. In my experience, going through depression, anxiety, and addiction didn't make my songs better and didn't make it easier for me to write songs. Now, I have this understanding that I have to be well enough to show up consistently for the process of songwriting to be blessed by the muses every once in a while.

I'm proud of the songs that I wrote when I was younger, when I wasn't doing well. I'm amazed that I was still able to show up to the pen and paper. But I was afraid. I went on medication for depression in 2022, and I was afraid that it would affect my songwriting. But I can say confidently that, if anything, it's helped. Because now I'm feeling up to it on more days to just show up. Also, musicians die way younger on average than the rest of the population. I think that's bad. I want us all to have long lives and experience joy and be able to write 20 more years of songs. I want us to be well.

In the past several years, I've noticed more discourse about the fact that you don't have to be a tortured artist to be a successful artist, and you don't have to be depressed to be making good things. It's important for people to know that they can be joyful *and* creative—that it's not mutually exclusive.

Yeah, and you can still write about really dark things. I would just add one addendum to this. I just read this book called *Capitalist Realism* by Mark Fisher and I do think there's something very real going on that the book spoke to. One of the reasons I waited so long to get on antidepressants is that I felt this real resentment [about] feeling depressed because I live under late-stage capitalism, and everything in society is pushing me towards being depressed. Like, why do I have to take a pill because the way that we've structured society fucking sucks?

I want to validate young people—especially those trying to be creative and break through on TikTok and have to be on their phones 10 hours a day—[who feel] that doing so makes them depressed. That there's not something wrong with them. They might not even have a chemical imbalance. We just live in a society that makes us depressed. I don't think it's all biological. I think some of it is absolutely sociopolitical. But that being said, I'm still going to take the meds because I do live in this society and I need some help.

Your music has created such a special community for a lot of people. Many fans credit MUNA with helping them discover their queerness. As a queer artist, how do you see queer artistry evolving in the music industry? What role do you hope to play in that evolution?

It's a beautiful thing. I'm thinking about the government that has come into power and how much they are doing to demonize queer and trans people, and to try and keep young people from discovering who they are and what feels good for them. At the end of the day, we still live in a country that doesn't censor what music is played on the radio. Chappell Roan is on the radio. It's still going to be there because queer people make the best music so they're going to be on top. The little kids will discover it, hopefully. Now I just scared myself that they're

going to start censoring the pop music…

I don't know what is next. I'm just very aware of this beautiful sense of… not to use my own metaphor, but the baton of it all, [the idea] that we all are connected. In the way that Tegan and Sara—and the people that came before Tegan and Sara, like the Indigo Girls—empowered MUNA, I like to imagine that MUNA empowered Chappell and Reneé Rapp and Billie Eilish and the other queer artists that are coming out now.

I'm really excited about the next MUNA album, and I hope that the people who maybe are coming into their queer identities now will be into what we're doing. But I can't ask for anything more than what has already happened with MUNA's community. Especially because the fans are so kind and sweet and generous and compassionate with each other. You do hold that question in your mind of what is possible once you reach a certain scale. I think we always want MUNA to grow, but we want it to grow at a rate where we can uphold our values and the fan base so that when they come to shows, they continue to feel as good as they have in the past.

You've said that you don't assimilate in your role of being a queer pop star. Thinking about the music industry and what a beast it can be, how do you resist assimilation? How do you preserve your natural creative instinct?

[There is an] impulse to maybe shift your image so that it's palatable in a way that mainstream society can digest it. I think that happened to us a lot at the beginning of our band. People didn't really know how to style or do glam for two very butch people. We were marketed as a "girl band," which we're not. I think that Gen Z is better at this. There's an understanding that people of different genders don't always have to look one way.

I haven't always been steadfast about resisting the urge to shift my image. There are times when I've shaved my armpits before we go on TV because I just don't want to fucking hear it. You make your own choices on a day-to-day basis. But the other thing is to not censor yourself regardless of what stage you are on. I think MUNA's decision should just stay very open and honest about the causes that we are in solidarity with, like when we did a Free Palestine chant at All Things Go.

I think there can sometimes be a pull towards not being explicit about your politics because you might be able to be more subsumed by the machine. I think Chappell is a great example of staying honest. It was very brave for her to be clear about not wanting to endorse Kamala. She got a lot of backlash for it. But that's how a lot of queer people feel. It's just a general attitude of, "I don't want to be a part of your club. We're trying to build something different over here, so y'all can enjoy it, but I'm not trying to get invited to your party."

Katie Gavin recommends:

Picking up an old hobby

Psychiatric medication

Capitalist Realism by Mark Fisher

Heart-opening stretches

Young Girl Forever by Sofie Royer

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