On doing it yourself



Musician Katie Harkin on DIY, a life of collaboration, the value of being underestimated, and what you can learn from burning out.

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As told to Annie Bielski, 2638 words.

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You recently released your debut solo album under Harkin, after touring as Sky Larkin and playing in bands like Sleater-Kinney, Courtney Barnett, and Wild Beasts. What has the journey been like making your solo album and putting it out now?

Well, Kate [Leah Hewitt] and I decided to start a label so that we could put this record out. Initially [it was] because I have been playing and working as a musician for a long time, and that did afford me access to meeting with a wide number of people on the basis of my collaborations, and then I would kind of get so far into discussions and then the collaborations would become a sticky issue.

You know, the antiquated structure of the music industry is that you become a sales person for your product, which is yourself. Looking at these conversations that I was having, after a certain point they wanted me to be monogamous, which to me is a complete contradiction to the nature of music itself, and also the nature of how people find music, especially now. So that was kind of the main frustration, to find a way to release music and bring music to people and to be able to continue collaborating and offering my musical abilities to other people in a way that wasn't going to be frankly, legally impossible.

It started off as a way to remain creatively agile, but I couldn't have anticipated that would include having the executive decision to not push the album back. I was doing all this press around the release and so many people were like, "Why didn't you push it back? Why didn't you push it back?" When it was released, Britain was in lockdown, that was our main lockdown, and really the last thing I wanted to do was cut off any line of communication that we had with people. Ultimately, the people who were able to continue releasing were those who had the freedom to be able to make that decision. It was just heartbreaking thinking about the decisions that will have been made, not with the musicians in mind, not with the music in mind, not with the fans in mind, but with protecting other people's investments. I was very grateful that we had the flexibility to be able to react in real time and to not be controlled by other people's vested interest.

With Hand Mirror, you're putting out your own work and supporting the work of other artists. Will you talk about that structure?

Coming from Northern England and The Midlands and growing up and feeling like an outsider, I began to identify really strongly with culture. It helped me in a lot of ways figure out my own sense of self. So [as] a person that has been able to play music for a decent while, it seems logical that if I can figure it out once and then replicate that in any way, it's the whole point.

It's supposed to be an umbrella or a scaffold or a wide oak tree—however you want to stretch that metaphor—and to put a creative umbrella over the things that Kate and I both do separately. Also to recognize that as much as the digital age has facilitated limitless exploitation, also within that there are limitless possibilities of

expression. If this was the 60s, I would be sitting down and going, “I’m calling up the pressing plant,” and that’s the end of the conversation. “I’m sending the record to radio,” and that’s the end of the conversation. But the thing that I’m most excited about with Hand Mirror is I have no idea what it is in the best way possible, because I do see it as a home for creative possibilities. Kate is someone that has been a community organizer and a creative events’ organizer, and obviously that’s going to be a big part of it—which we’ve had to reconfigure. We’re currently working on our first print journal featuring 25 artists and writers.

In terms of looking at it generationally, this is something that I do see as a lifelong pursuit. We weren’t told to be trained as app developers when we were children, because that didn’t exist. And the thing I could best hope for as a child, is that the thing that we will be either doesn’t exist yet or exists in an improved version in the future. So I think it’s exciting to be able to set out, just with the attitude that we don’t know all the answers. It’s not about, “I’m a big deal. Come and associate with me because I’m a big deal.” It’s about being a meeting place for the community in whatever realm that means. That for me has been music, because the people that I’ve played music with have had such a positive impact on my life to the extent that it is truly impossible to imagine it without it in any possible way—geographically, emotionally, all of it really, and that’s why we’re open to submissions and just exploring things because I think if you’re going to set out as any kind of cultural organization, things are always changing and that’s exciting to me. That’s the fun part.

While working on your latest music, how soon did you let others in?

I didn’t tell anyone I was doing it for quite a while, and I think it’s because I wanted to feel like I truly developed an independent voice because there is that sort of anxiety of influence. I think about it a lot. Even on a sort of muscle memory level, I totally acknowledge going on tour with a band and playing their songs for three years in a row, and then I can just show up at a practice and somehow remember to play that stuff. It’s deep, it’s in there.

It’s not that I was necessarily trying to be defiant of my experiences—my sort of least favorite scenario would have been I put out the first track that I finished and then by the time I had an albums worth, I’d actually really changed my mind, and then people are like, “Oh, I prefer the early stuff,” or “This doesn’t sound like this.” I knew that I didn’t want to make any compromises on it, and I think that included internally within myself.

I needed to make sure that I was really sure about this. Putting my own name on it was a part of that, rather than kind of constructing further artifice. I really needed to convince myself before I could convince other people that like, “Yeah, this is what I’m trying to do.” I just really wanted to know, and I wanted to give myself the time to find that out, because as long as I didn’t tell anyone about it, the only pressure about it was coming from me. I can handle that—kind of.

How do you get into a writing space?

That pressure of trying to catch the lightning in the jar has only worked for me maybe once or twice in my life, in terms of sitting down and writing a whole song. But equally, I feel like I can hear when a song has been built like a franchise. The building totally stands, but it’s a chain store, it’s a big box store. It’s still solid work, but it’s not what I’m aiming for. So some combination of ritualistic note keeping—it’s not very exciting. My artist friend introduced me to the word fossicking, digging for gold. It’s a good one. So, sort of that thing, picking up a small stone every time you walk past it, and the guy that built a house out of pebbles.

When I was a little kid, I used to love to make collages, so it sometimes feels like that. I definitely approach things from the emotional end first. I mean, I’d say this and I could change my ways tomorrow, but usually when I write a song I know at least the vague feeling of what it’s about, even if I haven’t put it into words yet. Part of that is sort of deciphering unconsciousness, as much as it is like being a biographer. The times when I have been the happiest with my songs is when they feel like a medium somewhere between the two. I was setting out to do something specific, and then something else was conjured because of being prepared to confront something. Getting into that confrontational mode will unlock surprising things.

A lot of this record I wrote when we were living in the Peaks District, and Kate would take the train to work or I would drive her, and I would have a car and drive around and sing. I think there is something to the sort of visual stimulation of motion that helps with writing. I know that people have done the Amtrak Writers Residency, which I've always been very jealous of, and I think it's almost like how I feel taking photographs on tour has been a great education just because of the constant visual stimulus being different. I find it very difficult to read fiction on tour, and I think it's because of that. I'm already inhabiting different worlds on a sort of 24 hour basis, I find it hard to create one in my mind.

How do you avoid burnout while you're on tour?

I avoid burnout by the fact that I have spectacularly burnt out. I got a really painful chronic nerve inflammation when I was on a tour that sent me to the emergency room. That took me quite a while to recover from. That was really the wake up call. Having a very painful nerve inflammation when you're traveling in a tour bus, I just had to totally slow down when that tour finished. It was one of those things that, apart from being totally run down, reared its head almost as mysteriously as it left.

So really the answer was just to cut everything out and see what it was. I broke the cycle of alcohol and coffee. I mean, I'm a British person, so I still drink tea. It seems like it's obvious to say, but oftentimes, especially as an emerging artist, it's easier to get a free beer than it is to get a free meal, which is just destructive. You'll get drink tickets, but there's no food. Can you afford to find any, and do you have time before soundcheck and those kinds of things?

So, yeah, that's been my general road to try to take care of myself, and also whilst touring at the frequency that I was. I had to take a three month break. I couldn't play guitar for three months because of my nerve, and that was a real true wake up call of like, "Your body is the thing that enables you to do this." Also, very minor things, like playing guitar in a sports bra, have revolutionized my life. I really don't know why I didn't think of it because it's this thing that you do where you sort of jump around for two hours a night, and you come off stage and you're covered in sweat, but it didn't occur to me to draw the line, not being a sporty child. But that is an aerobic event. I'm like, "This is about my feelings, not about my body!"

"I'm an indoor kid!"

Yeah, truly! So sort of drawing the line where music is like, "I've pursued my feelings and not my body," and then, "Oh yeah, your body has been there the whole time and you need it to talk about your precious feelings."

Is there something you feel inspires your work that isn't necessarily related to music?

I studied history of art and material studies at uni, which is artists' practical methods, but in a historical way, so I was kind of on a route to become a paintings restorer [or] a sculptural restoration person. I've always been really inspired about how artists write, rather than how musicians write or writers write. I can remember Robert Smithson's writings being life-changing when I first read them as a teenager, and I think there is something about the kind of sort of interdisciplinary-ness of artists that also write. They'll be working, and there will be an accompanying essay, whereas there's not as many records that will come with an accompanying essay, and there's a million reasons for that.

When did you realize you were an artist?

I've got a photograph that I took at an aquarium on a summer holiday, and I think I will have been around the age of 10, I can't quite remember. I remember it was a roll of disposable film. It was the first time I realized I made something outside of myself that I felt, "This is a thing that I, myself, find remarkable." It was this one photo out of all the other holiday snaps that I had taken. There was something otherworldly about it, taking a picture into a fish tank. I was like, "Ah, that's cool. I want to do more stuff that makes me think that it's cool in that way." That's the first time I can identify that feeling as existing externally outside of myself in some tiny way.

What has been the most surprising part of your creative path?

That I've had one. I think being a kid in punk bands in Leeds, the worst thing that anyone could be called is a careerist. There was a sort of gold rush for Yorkshire lad bands because there were a few very commercially successful Yorkshire lad bands. It really has nothing to do with those bands themselves, it's more about the sort of industry pivot to sign a bunch of northern teenagers and then lock them into a recording contract to make an album, that in a lot of cases, actually never came out.

I was in bands that people didn't really know what to do with. Being in groups that people saw as non-commercial meant that I did have the freedom to be like, "Yeah, I'll jump in the van with Wild Beasts" because I don't have a publishing company telling me not to tour so it will fit in with their marketing plan. I think being DIY, but also by never being viewed as a commercially viable option, strangely just led me to be able to have loads of experiences that I didn't know would turn into a thing that I could pay my rent with.

Wild Beasts were the first band that took a chance on me to play their music on stage with them. We were two bands that didn't really sound anything alike, but were bands coming up around the same time in Leeds. Promoters would be like, "Well, people seem to like them, but they both sound really weird so we'll just put them on the weirdo bill together." So we're together in a city like Leeds, that doesn't really necessarily have a prescribed sound, and is small enough that there's a lot of different genres of bands playing on the same bills as each other, which is very advantageous. I think there's some ways in which I've been underestimated, which have ended up being incredible opportunities.

Katie Harkin Recommends:

The TV show *Alone* (voluntary peril is transfixing)

A Journey by Nikki Giovanni

I'm excited for the new Bartees Strange record

Mrs. Daly's Wheaten Bread

Davon

Name
Katie Harkin

Vocation
Musician

Tomm Roeschlein