

On putting art first



Musician Lyra Pramuk discusses a musical practice as devotion, eschewing the English language, and her collaborative adventure with a slime mold.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2781 words.

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The press materials for *Hymnal* describe the album as inspired by the role of music in pre-modern times. I often fall into the cynicism of thinking of art and music as a luxury when there are dire threats to our wellbeing... But that's not really the case-art is a form of survival. I'd love to hear from you about art and music as something life-giving.

Art in the Western world has been relegated to this side thing because it challenges profit motives, colonial motives, and imperial motives. But if you look at a lot of other cultures throughout history and a lot of Indigenous cultures, life is art. Culture is art. It's a holistic thing. I reject the notion that art is a side thing.

I went to public school in Pennsylvania, and as is the case in many American public schools—especially in small towns—art and music are side things. Like, "Okay, you don't really have time for these; it doesn't really matter." I'm like, "If art, music, therapy, and all these other things that are put on the side were actually put in the center, it would drastically affect culture and how we live our daily lives." If we're stuck surviving, it's because we live in a world that does not value creativity. And I value creativity, and I believe that creativity is for more than just arts and crafts, or music or dance or painting, or any of these things. Creativity is essential for being alive. It's essential to create culture. It's essential to being a sentient human being in community, in ecosystem with other living beings on this planet.

I want to hear you speak even more on creativity being not just music, art, dance, painting, but something greater. Can you talk more about that?

I think that creativity is survival, if we reframe it. We have always needed to be creative throughout our evolution as a species. Creativity is essential, and it's not outside the scope of what constitutes our life. It's this sleight of hand by people in power to make you think you don't need creativity, when in fact creativity is the key to our freedom and flourishing.

Wealthy people who want to maintain the status quo do not want lower-class and middle-class people to be more creative. If people have education and creativity, they can influence culture. They can influence the economy with their buying power or boycotting. They can reinvent their dependence on certain products, or they can farm. Creativity challenges the elite who run the world and who harvest and exploit us.

There's a fundamental irony that, often in certain creative spaces, the audience is entirely wealthy people.

Yeah, exactly. I do feel that limitations in creative process and curation are important. For me, it means that having a clear process or aesthetic idea is a value. It could be quite a maximal aesthetic, and I'm still into that, but I can tell when someone has put thought into the output of what they're doing. And similarly, a

thoughtful curation I find really important. It's not like I want art to be totally democratic. I don't think that would be better. But I think there is so much room for more people to be making art, and for creativity to be more of a holistic part of every human being's daily life. For more people to have access to art and art education, and to bring art into their own practices in whatever they do, even if they're not artists.

On the other hand, for me, creativity is also connected to spirituality. I consider my musical practice to be devotional. I consider that I make devotional music, and that means it's a spiritual music. *Hymnal* has been a process for me to further define what is my devotion and what is my spirituality. The creative process for me is also a process of exploring mysticism, and exploring not just a technical industrial exploration of art—of "I'm making an album"—but also exploring the magical or animistic potential of technology through creativity, of tools through creativity, to try to get to some feeling of divine or cosmic consciousness through intuitive choices.

Can you walk me through the process of editing your work? How do you know you've reached the point where you feel a piece of music is ready to share with the world?

I feel like that's so intuitive, and it has a lot to do with my experience of the work but also other people's. There's a point when I'm putting together demos where I might share some demos with a few people. I'm someone who benefits a lot from conversations and feedback. I work in a very solitary way when I'm producing or composing for a significant time, and there comes a point where I want to start sharing it with other people.

I remember the mastering engineer Emily Lazar saying, "You have to think that there are two different types of listening. There's the listening you do in the studio in front of the speakers, and there's the listening you do that's less work-centric, where you just throw the music on and grab a magazine or lie on the couch somewhere else in the room and listen to it as an experience. Not so technically minded, not trying to interpret it, not approaching it with intellect." I make changes very intuitively, but I experience my work. I try to find some kind of distance to it outside the worker's room [as] someone who loves music—to listen to it and feel like, "Is this something I love to listen to?"

How or where in your process do collaborators come into your work?

I might frame that within a larger model of how I go about a project—and this probably doesn't work for everyone, but I am a very meticulous person when it comes to processes and systems. I knew I wanted to collaborate with even more people on this album, but it's also important for me to have a system for that... I've set out with some kind of process of steps or phases, and how they feed into each other. I like to set up these systems, and the systems have to have limitations, otherwise it would be too much.

For example, I set up two different recording sessions for *Hymnal*. One was a two-day recording session with the Sonar Quartett, a string quartet in Berlin. I had written a bunch of music on my laptop and then worked with Francesca Verga, a string player and arranger in Switzerland, to make arrangements. And then we recorded together, conducted the string quartet for two days—75% of that was pre-composed material with me in the studio. I had all these other strange vocal production sketches that I do in my free time. That's my base practice. I produce with my voice. I had a few sketches I thought I might want to put on the album. We did some structured improvisation with the quartet. I would frame an improvisation like, "Okay, maybe in this style." Or, "The two of you starting." Or, "Can you play a minor chord?" Or, "Start with these pitches." [I would] call changes in their in-ear monitors and work like that.

I did another recording session two and a half weeks later. I worked with demo string recordings, put together 20 or 25 demos from the string parts, and recorded with those. I knew I wanted to do a recording session that was only improvising with the voice because I wanted it to feel more folky and improvised. I didn't write any top lines. I didn't write any vocal parts.

That was fundamentally all the material for the album, from these two recording sessions. That was a system I set up, and I said, "Whatever I finish with, that's what I'm going to use." I wanted to explain that as the system, then say that there are different people involved—there was a really important collaboration that I didn't mention as a part of this system. Can I share a bit about that too?

Of course.

I used very little, if any, English language on my debut album *Fountain*. I wanted to let it speak with the sound of my voice and the emotional impact of the sonics of my voice, to let that be at the center. That came primarily from being a native English speaker who really enjoys language. I was already touring in Europe for some years, and I had performed some very verbose, wordy English songs, and it felt weird doing this in Europe with many people who were speaking English as a second or third language. When I started to make music without any words, it was so freeing because I felt like I could connect organically with people without them needing to have a dictionary or a translation assistant... I loved the immediacy of it.

I think declaiming language on stage takes people out of the deep listening experience, the deep feeling with the language of music. A big process challenge for me [with *Hymnal*] was, I knew I wanted to bring in more language but to do it in an original, kind of fragmented way. I commissioned my dear friend Nadia Marcus to write eight poems to a prompt, which was this idea of a character who's running around the earth in time-lapse from sunset to sunrise, through the night, guided by distant stars, exploring all the landscapes and creatures you might find on the earth, on our home.

The poems are absolutely beautiful. I'm really into astronomy and astrology. Nadia's very into the symbology of tarot, so the poems have a lot of tarot symbols in them. They were still literally poems. But they affected the compositional process in terms of the fantasies or impressions I got to come out into music, just from reading the poems. We did this blackout technique where we only left a few of the words in each poem, key words or phrases. So most of the words were erased.

My idea was to work with a friend of mine, the Finnish artist Jenna Sutela, who had worked in the past with this single-celled organism, this yellow slime mold. She works at the intersection of post-humanism and technology, and her work is incredible. The slime mold was used in Tokyo to make a miniature map of the subway system with these little pieces of oats over all the subway stops. When they allowed the slime mold to grow over the map, consuming oats as it went along its path, it showed some paths for the subway trains to run that were more energy-efficient and faster than the existing system. Following the process strategy of one of the great American modernist composers, John Cage, I thought it would be really interesting to create a randomized environment using the collaborative intelligence of the slime mold. [We mapped out] a bingo card with words and phrases from the poems, then Jenna created an environment with the slime mold and oats for me to grow under my bed for a week.

I took pictures of it morning and night for seven days. With those pictures, I charted with arrows the path the slime mold took over the words. I used this as a visual score for my eight-day vocal improv session. Formally, what that meant was I had all these demos, and when I listened to a demo, I would find a section of the map that felt like it resonated with the musical idea, and then I would only allow myself to go to words that the slime mold had gone to. If the slime mold went forward and not backward, then I couldn't go backward to another word. I had to only go forward. It was a really beautiful experience, and I feel that collaboration across the whole record.

I wanted to ask you about your journey of moving to Berlin, going to clubs more, and getting a new perspective on what it means to be a composer. What can experiencing club music in its loudest, most immersive setting do for a creative person's process?

I got inspired as a teenager finding out that Björk had gone from Reykjavik to London when she was 25, and she wrote all this incredible music that was inspired [by] club culture and was working with a lot of incredible producers... I was really inspired by her courageousness. And I was always so into electronic music. When I finished studying classical music, I was like, "I need to just soak in electronic music culture." It was this intense craving. It totally changed my approach to creativity, music, and socializing in general.

The slime mold morphs, grows into this multi-headed beast, and moves together. That's a very good analogy for what happens to consciousness among human beings on a dance floor during a really deep set. It's so immersive... Your breathing and heartbeat become kind of entwined with the people around you. You literally are electromagnetically charged with the energy of people around you. It's very intoxicating and transformative. You feel like you lose

your identity, and you merge into this multi-headed being that is vibrating with the music.

For me, being a raver, being a clubber in Berlin, was a big challenge to my ego, but such a gift. I was able to feel immersed in community and as a node in music, in culture. I am someone who grew up singing in choirs, so it unlocked this freedom in me to approach my music in a more choral way. There could be many voices in my music. It didn't just have to be one. And that's very freeing. It's a very spiritual principle of trance, really, because dance floors are trance spaces.

I've been researching in the last year some different trance music coming from Sufi mysticism in North Africa, West Africa, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, and Tunisia.. It's resistance music for people to survive, build energy in their community, and overcome difficult circumstances. I was doing that as someone who was discovering she was transgender in a world where trans people don't exist very publicly and aren't supported very much. The histories of African-American music, blues, disco, house, Detroit techno—these are all musical cultures that started as safe havens in marginalized communities and spaces of resistance. It's resistance music. I think that's important to say because it's a musical culture that's about liberating people.

Lyra Pramuk recommends:

Make a ritual with your closest romantic partner, best friend, or family member. Sit together, with your hand on each other's heart, and share 3 things you're grateful for in your life, and why, one time per week. Bear witness to the other's gratitude every seven days. Feel connection and thanks in regularly repeating intervals.

If you haven't already, watch *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Perhaps it's been recommended already, but this is one of my favorite films ever, and I would still recommend it over and over. It also connects beautifully with some of the other themes in this list.

Spend an afternoon without internet, walking in the forest, in the mountains, or anywhere else in nature, listening to the birds, communing with insects and plants, feeling the sun on your skin and the earth beneath your feet. Do this at least once per month, ideally more. Remember that we come from nature, we are made up of it, and human society and its priorities have become very far removed from this reverberant ecosystem of weather, creatures and plants that have always been our home.

Go out into the sun first thing in the day, even if it's rainy or winter or you live in a city. Our bodies need the near-infrared rays and full spectrum solar energy in order to regulate. Keep your surroundings dark at night as much as possible. Try not to scroll at night, and give yourself plenty of time away from bright screens and blue light and plenty of sleep to allow your body to repair. Our health is actually quantum, light is a nutrient, and these natural light cycles have always been the cornerstone of our biological health.

Imagine your death and the death of your loved ones. Feel gratitude for each day. Life is a precious gift and nothing is promised. Take nothing for granted.

Name

Lyra Pramuk

Vocation

musician

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Leonardo Scotti