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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2861 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Anxiety, Inspiration, Success.

On learning to accept your success

Musician Madi Diaz discusses being afraid of losing the good things, making space for others, and letting go of a project once it's in the world. Your new album is coming out in nine days. How are you feeling?

I'm excited and I'm a little bit nervous. I feel like I am trying to give up anticipating how I'm going to feel. Releasing the single "Same Risk" felt like a relief to put out. And then "Don't Do Me Good," a single with Kacey Musgraves, was fun to put out because it was with a friend, and then the last single, "Everything Almost" was much more emotional for me than I had anticipated feeling. It's a pretty personal song and it knocked me sideways and put me in a headspace that I wasn't ready for. So I'm just walking forward because I'm ready to do it.

How has your songwriting process changed over time? Or is there a particular ritual or technique that has remained constant?

With touring so much and traveling again in my life, I think I've had to be more flexible with chasing ideas and trying to keep that part of my mind ready to catch whatever is coming to me. That can be difficult. I can fall out of that routine or that way of thinking and I'm a super routine-based person, so the more routine I can add to my life, the better I am. But the most helpful and the most elasticizing technique I've found is when I wake up in the morning and just do a free form, a word vomit for 10 minutes. Or there's this thing called object writing, where you pick an object and you stream of consciousness right to that object for using all of your senses around that object. That's been the most helpful thing to me. As for the writing, the process is about the same, but the ways that I get to it have had to be a little bit more fluid.

You write songs for yourself and other artists. How do you know when a song is finished or when it is good?

It's so weird. I feel like that's so tough. You just know, you do. I feel like if I could explain that, I'd probably be better at writing songs or something. If I knew the trick to it, then I would just do it every time and just always land the dismount. I don't think that every song I write is *the* song, but it's part of the practice of staying in your expression and your expressiveness and just trying to find the nerve and hit the nerve well every time. You know when you hit the nerve, it's like hitting a funny bone or on your knee when they're doing the reflex thing at the doctor. It's like you just know when you hit it and you know when you're not hitting it.

Is your songwriting process different when you write for other people than for yourself?

When I'm writing for other people, I just try to make sure that whatever's on their heart, whatever practices that they're in or life situations that they're finding themselves in, I try to make so much space when I'm writing for other artists. And just try to be a guide rail more than anything. And I can be as big or as small as required of me in any of those rooms. But I love it when an artist comes in with a thought, something that they've been excited, a way of thinking, something that they're trying to describe, or a complex emotion. And I like trying to concentrate on that the most and make that the purest and find the arrow and the bullseye with them. That's the most exciting thing to me. When you can communicate with one other person and the other person understands when you're saying it just right and then you hit that thing together, that's the best. It's such a fun feeling.

Is there a particular process that you like when you are collaborating with another artist on writing a

song?

Typically it comes out in just getting to know each other. And getting to know where they are in their lives at that time and where I am in my life at that time. And if we've both been through something similar that we're trying to process through, I think that that's usually where the song always comes from.

Your album *History of a Feeling* it's about a specific time of your life and what you were living back then. And this is also the same case with the new album *Weird Faith*. Are the albums connected in any way?

I think *History of a Feeling* feels like turning the page completely, if not even just the last chapter of my life. I feel like *Weird Faith* is just the next chapter in the book. *History of a Feeling* was so much about grief and really being present in that grief and sometimes being present in that anger and being present in that heartbreak. And then *Weird Faith* is still processing the last page, the last chapter to some extent. And how *History of a Feeling* has almost shaped me to prepare myself for this next chapter of my life where I'm meeting a person and falling in love again, or I'm trying to trust myself.

Because when you love something and the thing that you love inevitably breaks your heart, because it always does, and that doesn't mean that it's over. But I feel like you can suffer lots of little heartbreaks in a relationship. But when something hurts, you're always going to try to learn how to not do that again, and if you can, avoid it at any cost. I think that *Weird Faith* is a lot of trying to figure out how to not step on the potential landmines, and looking at that and being like, "How do I do this?"

I wonder if in the process of releasing something so personal, there was a part of you that was hesitant or that said something like don't go there?

My only hesitation was releasing it. I knew I needed to write about it. I knew that I needed to do that for myself, and that was going to happen no matter what. I think my hesitation was to include certain songs that were so personal. And even still playing them live depending on what's going on at the moment, can still hit me in that way that it's either so transporting and it's time travel and I'm back in that head space again. Or it's weirdly speaking to something that's going on in my life at that current moment, and I'm going, "How am I still talking about the same thing?" That's been my only hesitation, just knowing that once you put a record out, it becomes part of your story no matter what, and you're going to continue to have to face those parts of yourself.

Also when you release something what happens with the material after that is out of your control.

Out of my hands. Completely out of my hands for better or for worse. And I think that's been such a beautiful experience. I didn't know that by going through something so difficult and so painful I was making so much space for receiving so much love and joy and thanks and connection with people that I just don't even know. Strangers that resonate with the lyrics or they just feel like it's talking them through a similar place in their lives. That was special. That was the gift on the other side of that, as hard as that was.

You have collaborated with some of your friends on your songs. For example, Kacey Musgraves. How do you feel about bringing someone to sing something with you that is personal to you?

That to me just felt like such an obvious special moment. I feel like the whole record is so inward-facing and so reflective and internal, and that's not always how I'm processing things. I am a pretty verbal processor. I rely on my friends to talk through some bigger things with me. And so for me, having Kacey sing on "Don't Do Me Good," it was so wonderful to not be so alone in that feeling of like, "God, man, I keep going back." Having somebody on the other end of the telephone line while I'm trying to work through this feeling felt important to illustrate in the song.

How are you preparing to also sing all of this live for the first time on your tour?

One step at a time. It's been really fun to go back over these songs and start singing them. The melodies are really fun. I am proud of the record and I'm excited to sing it live because so much grows even beyond what we made in a record sense when you're playing it in a live sense. I'm excited to see what it becomes out on tour. Hopefully, it becomes even melodically bigger or structurally bigger than the record. Hopefully, it takes us somewhere totally different.

You've mentioned that *Weird Faith* tells a story of you falling in love and having all this hesitation. Was this an intention that you had from the beginning? Did it just start unfolding little by little?

It's so funny. *History of a Feeling* is all looking backward. It's very much looking at a thing that happened. And *Weird Faith* is very much in the present moment and talking about what is actively happening for me in a visceral [way]. It's walking into the future and I'm terrified. I'm walking into the future and I'm terrified and I'm just talking about it the whole time. I was lucky enough for it to become what it is. I do think that it captures just a lot of really vulnerable moments within a relationship and learning how to trust myself and discovering and unearthing these desires that had been living in me for so long that I didn't even know were there, but [realizing] that this person [in me] is inspiring.

You just mentioned that *History of a Feeling* was more about looking into the past and now *Weird Faith* is the present and what you're looking for. Creatively speaking, what's the difference between looking back and reflecting on that and writing about what is happening at the moment?

History of a Feeling is just pretty much talking about what happened. I've experienced it so I know what it was. And I'm just trying to open the box and go through what's in the box and go through what's there. As opposed to *Weird Faith* where it's like, "Well, the box is empty again, and I don't even know... I could try putting this in here. And what does it look like when the room is arranged like this? And how do I feel when the room is arranged like this? And how do I feel when this color is on the wall?" And it's so much more maybe emotionally experimental than the last record is. Because grief is grief and healing is healing. And this is just like, I don't even know what the future is going to bring.

So it's almost like bracing for impact and playing out all of the ways that it could go right and playing out all of the ways that it could go wrong and playing out all the things in between. And additionally, I'm just trying to talk myself out of that space and just be present. This is why there are mantras almost in the record where it's like I have to have weird faith about it, and nothing is a waste of time. Trying to tell myself that it all is happening and I've learned so much and I know so much more about myself than I ever have, and I feel closer to myself than I ever have, and that's the reason for all of it.

You live in Nashville, a city where so many of your artist friends live. When you are working on something new, do you share it with your community right away or do you prefer to work on your music by yourself and share the work until it's done?

There are certain songs that I've written that I'd get really excited about and I'll share with my friends. But I'm pretty private about that stuff, not because I feel secretive about it, but because I don't know, it's not all about me. Everybody's got their things going on. But every once in a while, if I'm excited about a song, I'll share it with a close friend that either I know loves the art of melody or song structure, or maybe appreciates production and will think that we'll just have thoughts on what we did. And then sometimes I don't want to hear anybody's thoughts, and so I won't.

Sometimes feedback can be a bit overwhelming or distracting.

Sometimes it gets out of hand. I try to keep things to myself because I know at the end of the day, I know I'm proud of it, that's the most important thing to me. I don't want to get caught up in what my friends think, versus me knowing that I really did some good work and hopefully, it doesn't suck.

In the past few months, you were the opening act for Harry Styles and were part of his band. You've also had your daytime and nighttime debuts, and you're about to release a new album and go on a national tour. Is this how you envisioned success?

I just feel like every time I make it up one mountain there's another one to climb right behind it. It's that elusive peak that you're just ever climbing and reaching. I don't consider myself successful. I consider myself absolutely fortunate as hell. And I mean, I can't believe that people want to talk to me about this stuff. This is so crazy. I think the success thing changes all the time, every day. Honestly, if I can get a good night's sleep, that's successful for me at this point.

So singing at Wembley Stadium with Harry Styles does not count? [Laughs]

That was a crazy [laughs]. I don't think I'll ever feel whatever that feeling is ever again. I had never played a stadium by myself before Harry asked me to open for him, and it was so cool. I didn't realize that he had the kinds of fans that would just be so encouraging and so loving. From the second that I walked on stage, I felt like I had already won.

For your new album, you mentioned that you wanted to explore also how anxiety-inducing falling in love can be. Did you learn anything about that process?

When I was writing *Weird Faith*, there was a lot of shallow breathing. With the love that I received for *History of a Feeling*, even that was anxiety-inducing. I've had so many things that weren't good in my life. So it's a crazy moment when you have a good thing happen to you because you're terrified immediately that it's going to stop. I've found myself so many times, whether it was something was going well in the music world or something was going well in my personal life, where my friends were like, "Oh my God, this is so amazing. Are you having the best time? Aren't you enjoying yourself? Enjoy it." And I'm like, "How the fuck am I supposed to enjoy this when I'm terrified?" It's like I have this thing and I'm already grieving losing it. This is so fucked up.

I can relate to anticipating the loss or ending of things.

And how to not numb out and just go, "Well, whatever's going to happen is going to happen." And have some aloofness. I don't want to be an aloof person. I don't want to be a cold numbed-out version of myself just so I can protect myself from things feeling good and bad. That's not the idea either. The record is struggling with that all-or-nothing feeling. It's how to hold all of it at the same time.

What do you think life is asking of you in this phase of your life?

Right now, I'd say my life is asking me to prepare, and I am almost prepared. And I also think that at some point you just have to accept that you've gotten as far as you can get and that you have everything that you need, and that now it's just time to show up.

Madi Diaz recommends:

Always write it down even when you think it's too dumb to write it down.

Do a cartwheel

Light a candle

Keep going

Sometimes when I can't sleep at night I imagine myself spooning me. Try that!

Name


Madi Diaz


Vocation


musician

Fact

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