On collaboration and memory

Musician Miho Hatori discusses the value of collaboration, the role of memory in art, and knowing when to let a project go.

August 6, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2103 words.

Tags: Music, Creative anxiety, Collaboration, Focus.

You've done a number of collaborations over the years with different kinds of artists. You've been a guest on another band's project and you've brought in people as guests on your own projects. What do you get out of working with other people?

I started my music career by doing collaborations. My first experience was actually the Beastie Boys asking me to sing "Light My Fire" by The Doors. So, it's pretty much likeI started from that place, and I always thought that it was natural to do collaborations. For me it's like oxygen. It's a very natural form of creativity. I do enjoy it a lot, and I can learn a lot from the people I work with. That's the most beneficial part of it. I do so many solo creations, too, so it's so nice to have human beings together. I always love that.

Is it different if you're collaborating as a guest on someone's project versus being in a full-time band with someone? How do you approach this differently? Does it change project by project?

I always hear what they're looking for. For me, that's very important. Some projects are their projects, not mine. They just need somebody who can help with that one song, for example. So, basically, it's like I'm more of an actor, not the producer. But, when I do the opposite, I can also learn a lot about how to work with people. So many people I've been working with have such a cool attitude, which is really, really fascinating.

Have you ever considered focusing on just one project, or do you prefer to have a bunch of things going on at the same time? Right now you have three full-time projects basically.

I often struggle to just focus on one thing. I don't know, I'm one of those people who cannot focus on one thing. I might have ADD. I'm like a kid in a way. But, at one point, I decided not to avoid that. It's how it works for me. I have a lot of imagination and vision. I thought it could be challenging to do more stuff; it's kind of like challenging myself to actually divide my personality for creation. I need a lot of organization in my mind, yes, but I'm actually really enjoying it. I do feel like it's healthier for me; all these different projects have given me more freedom to be a magician and creator, an artist.

When you have two or three projects going on at the same time, do you tend to prioritize one of them? Or you figure you see them all as equal projects?

For me, all my children are equal. Everybody has a different personality, and I change my attitude for each project, but it's all my passion and my energy and I see it all as equal.

You've been making music for some time. Do you think the way the music industry has changed since you started has allowed for more flexibility and more projects?

Yes and no. Back then, the situation was so different, and I was more focused on Cibo Matto, besides my other collaborations and stuff. But I do feel like, economically, the industry changed a lot, a big change. I always try to think positively about the situation now, because we cannot go back. I would also say that right now there are so many talented artists, and I don't know how they learned, really. They are maybe 20 years old or something and know how to produce complicated tracks. I'm the person approaching them saying, "Hey, let's make a song together," you know? I feel very excited about the music scene right now, especially here in New York. It's the most exciting time and there's so much variety. In the '90s, the community was much smaller and easier to get your head around. Now you need to go and look to find what you're looking for. That's very different. Back then it was just looking at the Village Voice newspaper. It's a challenging time for listeners as well, but also maybe that's freedom as well.

One of your new projects is called New Optimism. At one point you were considering putting out the New Optimism debut by yourself, but then you decided to use a label. Why'd you go that route?

I felt a little worried about the PR, because I do have other projects, too. I wasn't sure how much I could do for myself. Some people know how to organize that work themselves, but I don't think I have that capacity. And, as far as the label, I decided to work with Phantom Limb because I felt like they were really, truly loving my music, and I was looking for people like that. Especially now, I think that's the most valuable thing. That's the main reason. It's also just nice to work with the energy of other people. I enjoy that.

Do you ever get creative blocks? Or because you have so much going on, if one thing starts stalling, do you then just work on another project?

I always want to feel fresh when I do something. If I don't have that excited feeling, it's impossible to move people, and that's the most important thing for me.

I divide myself by three. So far I've been very happy about that. I do all different kinds of music. It makes sense in the world right now, because there are so many different layers. That's the way I have to actually survive in this world, maybe. Sometimes I do sit down to create and I have no idea. In that case, I try not to think about it. I'll go to some other place and totally forget about the music and everything. Anxiety makes me work sometimes, but once I start to get into it, I trust that the idea will come. So I don't worry too much about that.

Inspiration is hard. It's not something I can create out of thin air. It's there sometimes, but we never know when something will trigger us… sometimes it will be this completely different thing. Those are the things that I think are very important to capture.

Do you find that the way you compose music has changed much from when you started?

Some part of it is the same. The feeling is the same. I have a similar kind of energy, but the approach has changed a lot. There are so many amazing programs now, so much software, and so much new technology. You can play it all yourself. I do love it because, physically, I can't do everything, and carrying equipment is impossible for me. The new technology allows me to travel light on tour. It liberates a lot of female artists, I think, who might not be able to physically lift so much gear. To me that's futuristic, and a new optimism for me.

What inspired that name New Optimism?

I heard this term "the new sincerity" maybe 10 years ago. Film people and TV advertisement people were using it. That was after 9/11. Irony was pretty strong then, and new sincerity is about irony. I wanted something completely opposite, so I came up with the name New Optimism. But it's not like regular optimism; it's almost like a goth thing. It is much more about, "Oh shit, fucking reality." I think we had a lot of optimism in the '80s, for example, but time now is very different. So I'm trying to focus my mind on that new optimism.

I believe we can always find some light in any situation, but plain regular optimism is a little bit too naive. For me, New Optimism is like having the attitude to at least look at reality. There's no time to be cynical in this world; we're in a goth world, it's all darkness. But it's kind of interesting, too. It's almost like an attitude and a mind game to find something to be optimistic about. Sometimes we're in the darkness and we cannot find anything. We can create in the darkness. The name is definitely about patience, too.

How did you decide to end Cibo Matto?

I couldn't write a song. It was very hard to recognize it, actually. It was like, "Why can't I?" That was the biggest relationship I've had in my music career, so it was very hard to let it go, and it wasn't only my decision either. It took time to make that decision. I do believe that the project was very special, but change was necessary. I feel like we're taking out some kind of static energy and moving on. Those things are very important for many situations, especially in a relationship.

And bands do reunite a lot these days—so never say never, I guess.

Yes, to me it's a very natural flow. Sometimes you need to follow the flow. I still have a lot of love for the band and our songs are still there, and our fans are always there, sharing some moment together. That's a very valuable thing, and we cannot always predict the future.

When you made the decision that it was over, did it change the way your other projects worked?

I had more time to focus on my newer projects.

The placement in my mind for Cibo Matto was a completely different thing. It's still there, actually. That's an interesting thing I discovered. Cibo Matto is still there, because actually that's not something I'm controlling. It's people's history and in people's minds and visions. So, for me, there's no control over it. It's like, we're not doing it anymore, but people will still probably see the Michel Gondry video. You know what I mean? That time of my history is captured there.

That's the interesting thing about human beings and about memory. I have no control and that's cool. That version of me is here right now, and that made me think a lot about how we look at our present selves as well, because we're always changing.

The human brain is so interesting. We always have memories. Some disappear and some stay. But we want to keep them. I feel like artists who have passed away are still here, too. There's always something there, so capturing that moment is such a powerful thing.

Music is about that.

5 favorite artists/exhibitions that inspire me (for New Optimism):

Taro Okamoto - Not that many people outside of Japan know of him, but he is a very important artist/figure in post war era in Japan. Some people called him a Japanese Picasso, but I think nothing can compare with Taro Okamoto. I used to go to his exhibition with my family (three generations). I believe many creators in Japan grew up with his art and got inspired by him. His study about Jōmon period was super fascinating. This is just my opinion, but he re-discovered a Japanese identity that was lost from the war with a deep study of Jōmon combined with his ultra special personality and strong style.

Édouard Glissant - I am so inspired by his theory. *Poetics of Relation* is my favorite book. One of my projects, "(Le Salon de la) Mondialité" is a dedication to him.

Carey Young /Palais de Justice - Her art show at Paula Cooper Gallery was the best/my favorite art show of 2017. It was a powerful new era of femininity and story telling video to me. It was matured and tranquil, yet strong. I want to watch it again so bad!!!

Takashi Murakami / Little Boy Catalog - This exhibition was held at Japan Society. This catalog is just brilliant. It described Japanese identity so well. I don't think anyone other than Murakami has succeeded in describing this identity issue in a Western context. Also the translation is a piece of art to me- Linda Hoaglund is the one of best translators of Japanese, so it has brilliant text. This catalog inspired another project of mine, New Optimism.

Taro Izumi / Pan - I discovered this artist when I visited Palais de Tokyo. His sense of humor and approach is so unique! It's like being on the thin line between fun and serious. I can't describe the words/emotion between that!

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Vocation
Musician





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