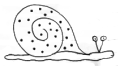

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August 29, 2024 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2306 words.

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On finding inspiration in your surroundings

Musician Remi Wolf discusses how the creative process can be shaped by the tools and instruments within reach, how great collaboration makes you feel safe, and how one moment can be all it takes to know a life of art is for you.

How did recording *Big Ideas* in a studio, as compared to recording *Juno* in a bedroom during lockdown, change how you went about finalizing your songs?

A fully functional, fully staffed studio is so much easier to write, record, and finish songs in, and it's much faster. You have more people around you doing really specialized jobs. You have an engineer who's there to simply record and mic up the drums and guitars, and I had my producer friends there to find tones and help with chords. Studio recording felt a lot more seamless, free, and comfortable.

I don't know if it was easier strictly because of the environment or because I had *Juno* under my belt already. But it felt really nice. It felt like I was held a bit more than I've felt held in the past.

I'm interested in what you said about having your co-producers there with you, because you had co-producers on *Juno*, but you were all working together remotely. What specifically about having them in person, as compared to virtual, felt more freeing?

Big Ideas was fun because I was working with collaborators I've worked with in the past, but I also was working with new people, which was something I wasn't able to do as much on *Juno* because of the COVID of it all. We weren't able to go and meet people, and explore and get to know people in the same way we are now. The option of being able to have new people come in, and there not being any barriers to entry, was really exciting to me and gave this record a lot more different flavors. I was able to build a lot more relationships with people who are incredible at what they do. This album wouldn't have been the album it is without having the ability to invite new people into the process.

It sounds like you're using fewer of *Juno*'s zany effects on *Big Ideas* while still keeping your core sound. How has your overall production process changed between albums?

We went from a bedroom to a studio, so that in itself changed a lot. The main difference is that we had access to so much vintage gear—vintage synths, vintage guitars—and it was all ready to go and hooked up, and there's such a difference between playing a MIDI synth keyboard that's emulating a Rhodes sound versus playing a real Rhodes. Having all these tangible and inspiring instruments around, and incredible mics and just incredible studio environments that felt really good to be in, changed how I felt when writing. It also changed the sonics of what we were exploring in all these songs. There's so much more real, vintage, and analog than we've ever been able to explore.

I'm getting the sense that you might be going into these sessions with demos, but you're completing the writing process in the studio, not going in with written songs and then producing them in the studio. If that's correct, I'm curious how having hands-on access to, for example, vintage keyboards instead of MIDI keyboards might shape how you write future songs.

I actually have never once gone into a studio with a demo. I always write in-studio. Even when we were doing bedroom sessions, part of the joy of songwriting for me is the collaboration of it all.

The production and the songwriting are both a very fluid process for me. The identity of these songs gets created through lyrics, chords, and sounds rather than just writing a song on a guitar, bringing it in, and then creating the sounds later. Oftentimes, I feel like there's too many options.

There are a couple songs on this record that were demos before we brought them [to the studio] or before I went back in and did more production tweaks or whatever. But even with those ones, the acoustic guitar that we wrote on ended up being a critical part of the identity [and] the production of that song too. I'm all about it all happening at the same time, and I'm really inspired by what's around me. It keeps me present and in the moment during the writing process, rather than coming in and trying to bring something that already has life, more to life. I find that to be a more exhausting process, and I think I get my best work when it's all kind of seamless.

How do you edit your songs amid this all?

The editing happens in real time while I'm writing. 99% of the time, I'm writing the final lyrics in the first hour of writing that song. I'm not into going back and editing because I trust my gut, and I put a lot of trust in my subconscious letting itself flow through me. So lyrically, there's not very many edits that happen.

As we write and structure these songs, edits are kind of constantly happening as the songs come together over a six- or eight-hour session. That's ethereal and hard to describe because the decisions get made so quickly sometimes, but a lot of it is—I am super driven by my gut, and my collaborators are also very gut-based producers.

I'm interested in what you said about the lyrics being like, they come out and then they're pretty much final. When one of your lyrics is more on the overtly funny side, do you kind of let the jokes flow out of you and then it sits on the page? Based on *Big Ideas*' lyrics, did you work against dropping jokes in there?

On this album, I let some silliness out for sure, on "Cinderella" definitely. But on this album, I had an intention of being a bit more transparent lyrically. On my past EPs and albums, I almost felt like I was writing for myself, in a way. I would have all these big metaphors or shock-factor lyrics that I would almost hide the real story behind, or real feelings behind. On this album, I really wanted to lift the veil a bit and let people see me more directly.

I also was older. I was going through a lot. I was on and off tour during this entire recording process, and I was learning a lot and had a lot of big questions rattling around in my head [about] how I wanted to conduct myself in my career and relationships. I was just thinking about life and growth. That made its way into the music and lyrics.

How successful do you think you were at being more transparent in your lyrics on *Big Ideas*?

I definitely feel more transparent with my emotions, and lyrically, than I felt on *Juno*. I think there's still lots of screens that I can lift up. I think that's something I'll always be exploring within myself—how direct, how artsy, how vulnerable I want to be in my lyrics. It's all kind of a balancing act, and I think I'll always be growing and learning on that front.

In this conversation so far, you've said a lot about how collaboration helps you express yourself creatively. Are there any parts of your creative process in which collaboration is more of a hindrance than a help?

Yes and no. There's definitely a time when there can be too many cooks in the kitchen. One process on this record that, I really felt like I had to strip it back in terms of how many people were involved, was mixing. I mixed the album with Shawn Everett, who's an incredible mixing engineer and recording engineer. At the beginning of the mixing process, I was going to have a lot of my main producer collaborators come in and work on it with me. But very quickly, I felt like I had to step up and take the reins for the process and the sonics to feel focused and like mine.

Shawn was incredible to work with on that front because he's so kind and such an amazing listener, but he also has so much creativity and technical skill that we were able to unite over this month-long period and execute our vision for how we wanted the final mixes to sound. At the same time, that still is a collaboration, but I think the size matters. How many people are involved really does matter at a certain point.

Solomonophonic has traditionally been your biggest collaborator. How do you know when somebody is someone you want to keep collaborating with? How do you know the closeness with which you want to collaborate with them?

There's a couple different factors to it. With Solomonophonic, I've known him since I was 15. We've been through so much together. I feel, creatively, very close to him and I feel safe with him, and I'm able to go into the studio with him free of anxiety. Whereas sometimes, with certain producers, you go in and you don't feel entirely like yourself or like you can let go, or it's not a safe space. The people I'm drawn to are people who really make me feel free in that way. I also think that if we don't think about making music in the same way, I find it difficult to work with certain people.

I love collaborators who are able to jam, who are incredible musicians, who play their instrument well, and who sink into more of a band mindset. A lot of people who I end up really liking working with used to be touring musicians or in their own band or who have an extensive past in performance, which is my background as well.

Can you talk more about your background in performance in this context?

I've been in bands and performing as a singer since I was in fifth grade. I've been doing it my whole life in different iterations of different bands. I was in a harmony girl group for three years with some of my friends—we weren't very good, but we were performing, and I was singing—at a young age. And then, in high school, I had a couple different bands, and we would perform around the Bay Area. I would be busking. We played at open mic nights, restaurants, and bars, and we would have band practice in our friend's basement.

That was what I loved to do. I've been performing for people on a stage and collaborating with people in a band setting for a really long time and have continued to do that. My whole life, I went to school for music, where you're in these classes where you're forced to be in a new band every week and perform for your professors every week. I have a lot of experience with it. People who have gone through a similar journey, I tend to immediately relate to.

Given everything you just talked about, have you known you wanted to turn musicianship into your career for as long as you can remember? Or was there a point when you realized, "I can do that, and I want to do that"?

There was a point when I was in high school and I was busking on the street. One day, we were out there next to an art fair, and I think we were there illegally, but we posted up and sang for two hours. By the end, we had made 180 bucks. I think that was the most money I'd ever made in such a short amount of time. I was like, "Whoa, there's something to this." Mind you, I was, like, 15. We probably didn't sound that good, but there was something about us that people liked enough to pay us money. I think that gave me enough confidence to start actively pursuing it.

Up until then, I didn't know that it was something I wanted to really pursue. I was kind of singing and songwriting for fun, and [the busking moment] happened, and I realized that maybe there was some sort of semblance of a career to be made. And then, I ended up applying for a bunch of music schools. Once I got into the music school I wanted to get into, it kicked in, like, "Okay, I'm doing this and I'm committed. and there's nothing else I would want to do."

At what point did you realize, "I'm going to be able to be financially stable with a music career," or was that never even a thing? Was it just like, "I'm going to do it no matter what"?

I was always like, "I'm going to do it no matter what." When I signed a record deal, I obviously felt a big sigh of relief, but even before that, I was working at restaurants and making music, and I was working in cafes and making music, and I really enjoyed that as well. I was having fun.

The beginnings of my career were so exciting because I was living this double life of having this job and then going home and writing music, and then I would get offered tours, and we would get in my Prius and drive up and down the coast. It was so exciting. Luckily, I ended up finding a manager and getting support from a label. But I think I would still be doing it today even if I didn't have all the backing that I do now.

Remi Wolf Recommends:

My Current Top 5 Soups and Places to Eat Them

Gazpacho on a yacht

Pho at Pho87

Chowder in Seattle

Chili at a ski lodge

Italian Meatball in the waiting room at the dermatologist

Name
Remi Wolf

Vocation
musician

Fact

Remi Wolf by Ragan Henderson

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