On finding your voice

Musician Samia discusses staying healthy on the road, balancing solitude with collaboration, and songwriting as a way to tell the truth.

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As told to Emma Bowers, 1938 words.

Tags: Music, Mental health, Process, Inspiration.

In some of the writing around your newest record, *Honey*, you describe experiencing a shift in your sense of self in your mid-twenties that came with a sense of clarity and heightened responsibility. There's a lot of introspection and self actualization you can really clearly hear in your lyricism—can you talk some more about that experience?

I was always really afraid of being alone, then the pandemic happened, and I had to spend a lot more time in solitude than I was excited about or was comfortable with. I ended up doing a lot of real introspection for the first time, and it was scary but I developed tools with myself that I used to process things that had happened in the past. I had always leaned heavily on people, and I still do, but I think the biggest thing that has changed between the time that I wrote my first record and the time that I've been working on this second one is that I have this new relationship with myself that honestly just helps me be a better friend and be a better community member and not get so caught up in chaotic situations and not know how to handle them. I think that's really universal with people our age. It's the time when you start being totally responsible for your actions, and it's the time when people start to take you seriously, and that's a lot of weight and pressure, too. People are depending on you more.

I'm really grateful for the time that I had to spend alone. I don't think that I would be able to be as honest with myself and everyone else as I am without that time. A lot of the stuff that I wrote about [on the record] stemmed from conversations I had with my closest friends about zooming out and talking about existentialism and our philosophies on life and the meaning of life, and then zooming in just as quickly to talk about interpersonal conflicts, and how both of those things can hold the same weight, which is really a confusing phenomenon for me.

In addition to these conversations with peers, was there any regimented thing that you did that was a tool that helped you process this?

Caleb Wright, who produced *Honey*, is a close friend of mine and has a lot of really beautiful routines that he incorporates into his creating process. That was inspiring, because I don't have a lot of those, and I learned a lot from being adjacent to that. It felt really ritualistic, especially the conversations that he and I had, because we were talking at length about the things that we were writing about because we wanted to be sure we were saying exactly what we set out to say. And sometimes that became a really grueling and exhausting process, but I feel like we were able to be mirrors for each other in a really unique and special way.

Because your writing style *is* so candid, take me back as far as you want to go in the process of developing your voice?

I grew up around musical theater, and so I've noticed that a lot of the time in musical theater, when people start singing, they're singing their inner monologue. When the dialogue is happening, it's just more of how they

want to be perceived, so there's a real dissonance between what's going on inside and what's being communicated outside. Noticing that was super formative for me.

I've always seen songwriting as the time that I get to say the truth, which is terrifying, because I then also share it publicly, because it's this means of private catharsis and also I'm announcing it. I think as more people are listening, it becomes scarier for me because I'm like, "Oh, this is how I'm being perceived, is my darkest innermost thoughts." I don't even really get to introduce myself with niceties. But I'm also grateful for it, because it allows me to immediately connect with strangers in a way that I probably would've never gotten to because I'm really shy, and I think I ended up getting this gift of connection to people that I don't think I would've been brave enough to do in conversation.

Have you heard the term vulnerability hangover?

No, that sounds relatable.

I think about it in the context of having an actual hangover, when you get drunk and maybe say things that you normally wouldn't, or you're a bit more outgoing than you're used to being. I think sometimes we can feel tension between a moment of exceptional vulnerability, saying what's on our mind or acting on impulse, and then worrying after the fact about how you might be perceived because of it. It seems as an artist you are really vivid and forthcoming, do you ever feel conflict about being so open? Is there tension there?

Totally. Especially when I know that it's being misunderstood, which happens. You can't prevent that from happening, and anyone with a phone can see what people are saying about them. So, as much as I try to remove myself from it, I'm going to see those things. So much of the time it's met with understanding, and then the times that it's not, I'm like, "Oh my god. I really just created this dialogue between me and someone who doesn't like what I have to say, and I just opened myself up to criticism from this stranger that I would've never gone up to in public and asked their opinion of me." It's a terrifying thing to do. I also try to be realistic with myself about the privilege that it is to have people telling me they connect with it, and how, ultimately, that outweighs the times that it feels uncomfortable or painful. But I'm definitely still working on it.

Your live performances are energetic and fun. How have you cultivated your physical presence during performance?

When it comes to physicality, I've always been obsessed with the riot grrrl movement and punk rock performances, especially by women. I was really into Kathleen Hanna and watching her perform. I think it's fun, because my music doesn't always align with that type of onstage persona, but it feels totally ironic to me when I'm doing it. I used to get these Facebook messages from middle-aged men that were like, "Your sexual antics on stage are going to ruin your career. You're too nice of a girl to be doing that," and it would fuel me, because the whole thing is a joke to me, especially anything that could be perceived as sexual or confident is so me just making fun of myself and trying to emphasize and highlight how silly the whole thing is, especially as a reprieve from the dramatic content that I'm singing about. But it's fun for me. It's really cathartic to move around aggressively on stage, and I always feel a release afterwards.

I'm thinking there might be some people who are curious about what your ideal vocal care regimen looks like.

My dad is a singer, so I felt lucky that I got to see that up close growing up. I got to see where his obstacles were and what he had to do to overcome them, and because of him I have this archive of knowledge about singing and touring that I'm grateful to have. My voice is really fragile, so I have to be un-fun on the road to protect my voice, and because I'm moving around so much on tour, it's almost impossible to do everything I'd ideally like to do, even on a good day. I try to do 45 minutes of vocal warm-up, sometimes over an hour if I need to. I don't eat dairy, I use a vocal steamer, I sleep with a humidifier, and I have to take a shower and sing in the shower. It's so exhausting. The whole process is longer than the show usually. But if I don't, especially traveling, with the different weather and hotel rooms, I just get dried out and performing becomes difficult. I hate canceling shows, it's such a nightmare.

What's the worst advice you've ever received?

Oh. I hope my teacher never sees this, but, I have a really old song called “Paris,” and in the end of the song I say, “Don’t write the end of our novel, I won’t write the end of our…,” and then I don’t stay “song.” It rhymes, and you get that it’s supposed to be sung and you get, hopefully, that I’m choosing not to say it. I played it for the class, and everyone was like, “Cool, nice trick.” Looking back, sort of a kitschy thing, but the teacher was like, “I have a great idea. Wouldn’t it be interesting if you said song?”

It was as if he thought of it on his own, even though it was the punchline. The whole class was outraged and screaming at him. I feel bad because I know he was just trying to help, but it definitely would have defeated the purpose of the whole song.

I’ve found that in journalism, and especially in criticism, there’s this concept of “killing your darlings.” Any time you think you’re being clever, your editor tells you to cut it. Early on, when I first started getting that edit I chafed at it. I would feel like I had found some interesting way to describe something or had done a good job communicating this kind of abstract relationship and they would be like, “No, it’s not clear. Kill it.” It makes sense why—clarity is key in criticism—but in songwriting? Maybe this sense of being straightforward was ingrained in your professor.

Totally, and looking back, I sort of agree with him, but it was as if he didn’t even understand the thing that I was trying to do. It was the biggest miscommunication of my life, probably [*laughs*]. But yeah, I feel that way now, especially with this second record. I feel like I’ve cut it down a lot. In my first record, it was all written in code and this poetic prose. I was trying to be smart and clever the whole time, and on this record, I stopped myself from doing that because it felt dishonest at this point in my life. I’m starting to respond better to music that doesn’t do that. That’s really interesting. That’s going to stick in my head for sure. “Kill your darlings.”

I think that it’s a helpful vantage point to consider when you’re developing your voice. It seems like this new approach to your lyricism has made your newest record especially potent, you can definitely hear it.

I feel like the only thing you have, really, is your unique perspective on life, and your totally singular stream of consciousness. Nobody else has the one that you have. What I feel like I can do is share exactly how I see things, and that’s the only thing that sets you apart from other people. I think trying to be the best songwriter or the best lyricist is a futile attempt, because you can really just be you. That’s what I feel like I have to offer at the end of the day.

5 Songs by Samia:

“Big Wheel”

“Show Up”

“Breathing Song”

“Welcome to Eden”

“Honey”

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Vocation
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