On protecting your passion

Musician Sarah Jane Scouten discusses about taking time away, being led back, learning from plants, and staying passionate about her passion.

April 8, 2025 -

As told to Kailey and Sam Spear, 3263 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Success, First attempts, Beginnings, Process, Day jobs.

We'd love to hear about your personal songwriting process. How would you usually begin writing a new song?

Oh, my gosh. It happens a lot of different ways. Often, I think of it like a pearl. It starts with a little grain of sand, and then you have to just let it turn around a bunch… Or maybe it's like a snowball.

Sometimes it'll happen that I'll have a tiny little phrase that'll bumble around my head, possibly for years. Possibly it'll just be that day, and I'll feel the need to just get the song out.

But, yeah, it'll just start with this little pearl. That's when you do the traditional thing of waiting for inspiration to strike. However, I also have my little tricks to jumpstart the creative process, because sometimes you're either not feeling jazzed about an idea that you've had, or you just feel like there's nothing there. I have my little songwriting tricks that I do, and I teach that method as well.

What are some of those tricks?

The method that I teach, that I came up with over the last eight years or so, is basically a variation of morning pages or sense-based writing.

This songwriting teacher, Pat Pattison, he teaches this method where you write for 10 minutes straight, in prose. You don't have to make it rhyme, you don't have to put it in neat verse-it's almost like word vomit. But staying in your five senses, you start with a little prompt. I'll tell people, "Okay. Wallpaper." Or, "Mountain," or something like that, and whatever comes to them, staying in their five senses, they'll just write and write and write and write.

Then we will go through what they wrote and see if there is any cool image nugget. I mean, because we're staying in our senses, there's going to be a lot of images generated. I ask myself, "Is there a particular image that really struck you?"

Then I'll use that as a little kernel, a little grain of sand. Sometimes that will actually bridge to another idea, so you won't use the original thing in your sense-based free writing. But it's just like you have to trick your brain into writing a song.

You sing about some deeply personal things sometimes. Do you feel that songwriting and performing helps you process certain parts of your life? Or do you find putting it to song is a way of honouring pieces of your life in an intentional way? Maybe it's both-or more than that?

Both. It can be incredibly therapeutic and that's, I think, how a lot of people–if not most people–come to songwriting, if not all art expression. It's a self-soothing, self-therapeutic method.

I used to be this avid journal writer. I'd start to feel really agitated if I wasn't journaling for hours a day. Now I find that the songwriting process satisfies something similar in me.

But that's just some songs, the particularly deep personal stuff. To give an example: I wrote a song called "The Great Unknown" about my mother-in-law who did assisted-death in Belgium. That was absolutely the only way I knew how to make sense of this bewildering, harrowing, beautiful experience that I'd been a bystander of, just supporting my husband, supporting my mother-in-law. But also honouring how much I loved her. So, that was that for me.

Sometimes I know it's worked, the expression, the catharsis has happened, because I'll cry almost to the point of dehydration. I'm like, "Oh, cool. Must have hit a rich vein on that one!"

That's one of those songwriting experiences that was absolutely therapeutic, if not necessary. I wouldn't have known how to process and internalize that experience without having gone to songwriting in order to do that.

Your music also tells other vivid stories that are apart from your personal experience. What draws you to storytelling, particularly in songwriting, and where did those narratives come from?

Yeah. I remember somebody said to me, "Oh, I love your songs, but I feel so bad for you!" I said, "Why?!" They said, "Well, all these bad things have happened to you." I was like, "Well, they didn't happen to me! I just have a vivid imagination."

There's a song in particular that maybe they meant–it's called "I Had to Be Right." I put it on a record maybe 10 years ago. I take on characters in order to write songs. It means that I've just got so much more material to work with than my own personal experience. My own personal experience is always embedded in the songs to give them their authenticity.

Why is narrative so important? I think that's the songs that I grew up on. Stan Rogers has always been a really big influence on me. That's how I discovered the ballad tradition.

I love a good story. It's often a tendency of mine to write a very narrative story with vivid characters that have whole lives. I could write a novel about a song, about the world that I create within a song, if you gave me the time to do it.

You grew up on Bowen Island, a small island off the west coast of Canada. Now you've made your home in a village in Scotland. How have you found your upbringing, or the places you've lived, have shaped your sound and stories?

It's interesting because I've always gravitated toward folk and Americana music, again because that was the music that I was raised with. But I'm hopelessly nostalgic. Even though I know that the past was a bad place to be–especially for women or anyone who's not white and male and able-bodied–yet I really, really romanticize it.

Growing up on Bowen, it was pretty easy to do that. Even in the 90s. I started hitchhiking at age 11, and everyone who owned a horse on the island, I had their phone number. I would call them up at random and say, "Can I ride your horse?" They would let me. I had an incredible amount of freedom and beautifully few distractions. I got my first cell phone when I was 16. I'm so glad that I didn't grow up with social media and iPhones and stuff like that. I was just reading. We didn't even have television. We had VHS, and we'd rent movies at Bowen Village Video once a week. It was great because their selection was weird, hippie stuff. I discovered some really cool films that way.

Anyway, growing up on Bowen, how did that influence me? I mean, I was allowed to live in my imagination all the time. I had so much room, so much freedom. The outdoors were just at my fingertips at all times. I guess I

started with a vivid imagination, and then Bowen just was a perfect place to have that. Yeah.

Do you find now, have you been able to carry that with you? Or do you have to work harder with the distractions to get yourself back to that place?

Oh, yeah. Definitely. Now that I'm an adult, and I have responsibilities, I have a hard time getting back into my creative process. It's a lot easier when there are fewer distractions, and when I've set out an intention to do that, or if I'm around other people who are creating.

Yeah, I mean, living here [Moniaive, a small village in Scotland]-part of the beauty of why we live here, is that there are few distractions. There're a lot of creative folks about, and the quality of life is really high compared to the cost of it. It's an excellent place to be an artist. It's very similar to Bowen. It's a bit feral, the way that Bowen was a bit feral, and it feels very familiar.

When you find yourself coming up against creative blocks, have you found a way to push through them or have you noticed ways that you have found your way through them?

I just don't push through them, I just trust that there's going to be a time.

I've never been a prolific songwriter, and I've met many songwriters who are prolific. They write all the time, but the quality is… I haven't seen it particularly good.

You can't be on all the time. I think I used to be really stressed out about that, when I'd have a dry spell. And now I realize that so long as I feel really proud of what I make, I'd rather have quality rather than quantity. That's probably counterintuitive to this content-generating culture that we have right now.

I lost my love of live performance and music for a number of years, and it was through that, forcing it, that I just burnt out. I was forcing myself to go on tour, I was forcing myself into a bunch of situations that were uncomfortable and incredibly difficult-just financially, interpersonally-and I hated being a musician. I just wanted to give up.

I remember a long time ago, I would meet musicians like that. I could tell that they were disgruntled. I was like, "No one makes you be a musician. Just get off the road, just do something else."

I had to take my own advice, and so I did. I got off the road for years. COVID helped with that, because it looked like I was taking a break, like everybody else. But the reality is, I had been planning to do that for quite some time already.

I do not force it.

That's definitely a skill to know how to wait and let it come in its own time.

Yeah. It's so precarious and delicate and precious, I often think, these days. Because we had so much taken away from us. As artists, we are continually giving things up, but with COVID, the rug was pulled out so quickly that now I remind myself of how it is a privilege to be an artist. It's a privilege to be asked to make art. But the biggest privilege is that you have the ability to do it. I think humans are all just, by nature, very creative, but maybe not in artistic, expressive, passionate ways. Sometimes it can feel like a burden like, "Oh, God. Why can't I just be happy doing something else, something that would be more stable or maybe make my parents understand me better or something?"

Then it dawned on me, I think in this last tour, in November, I was like, I remember just turning the door of this hotel and just thinking to myself, "I am so privileged to have the ability that I have." I have to protect that with everything that I do.

So, part of the protection is just being like, “Don’t force it. Don’t ever force it.”

When you said that you took time away, you took time away from performing to study herbal medicine, right?

Yeah, I did.

You’ve talked in the past about how the subtle power of plants drew you down an unexpected path, that of becoming a herbalist. We’d love to hear more about that journey and where it’s taken you.

Oh, my gosh. It’s so cool because I stopped being a musician for years, and I became a herbal medicine student. What I was doing for work was gardening, so I was just dirty all the time. When I wasn’t working with plants, I was foraging and making medicine and learning in such a microscopic way - just staring at plants and reading about them all the time.

That was a perfect antidote to me burning out as a musician, to just do something else. If you’re a passionate person, you’re probably going to have more than one passion. So, why not just follow another path for a little while? For me, it led me back to music.

That was always the idea, that I would hopefully start blending an artistic practice with a herbal medicine practice. That is what has happened. In fact, I wish that I had more herbal medicine in my life. I wish I just had more patients to work with. I’ve just fallen into being a musician again. Because the herbs, and working with the people, it’s so refreshing. It just like, it just wipes this clean slate and it gets me out of that navel-gazing art mode. I have to put on my clinician hat and be there for somebody 100 percent and take things, their health, which is often very complex - it’s a huge responsibility.

So, yeah. I think that, so far, it’s been the best possible thing for my art, to do something else.

What have plants taught you about creativity?

Plants taught me? Oh, my god. That’s such a good question! They teach me about everything all the time. But as far as creativity goes, necessity is the mother of invention-like studying the evolution of plants. I mean the evolution of life on earth, but also the evolution of plants. You’ve got whatever, algae, and then you’ve got these prehistoric trees that were sending out spores and stuff. Then you have angiosperms, which are the seeds. Basically one plant, one day developed a spore that was covered in this hard coating, and suddenly now the most dominant type of plant on this earth are seed-bearing flowering plants, because somebody had a great idea. A plant had a great idea! And it took off like wildfire. Obviously over an incredibly long scale of time.

I think that music, or any type of art, can be like that. Somebody comes along, has a great idea, and it’s genre-defying, it’s era-defying, and it changes the way everybody makes it from then on.

Maybe in the film context, it would be like, I don’t know… Maybe the method actors that were starting to act like they were real people and not theatre on film, and now that’s what we think film should be.

Then other pressures in music are, for instance, musical pieces used to be extremely long, and now we all only write songs that are three minutes or less, because we had to. Because there were these pressures, particularly in radio, and now suddenly that’s what a song is.

The adaptation, the evolutionary adaptation, creative adaptation, they’re the same. But obviously on a shorter timescale for within one human being’s life span.

So, now you’re at a point in your life where you have both music and herbal medicine in your life. How do you find music helps your work as a herbalist, and how do the plants help with your music?

The herbalism, it helps a lot. First of all, it is the same thing: freelance work. I remember when I started to

study as a herbalist, one of my teachers said, “You’re going to have a leg up, once you leave herbal medicine school, because you already know about freelance, you already know about self-promotion, and you’re able to ride the ups and downs and the uncertainty.”

There’re a lot of people who I studied with, they were absolutely brilliant. But I wonder if they’re ever going to leave those stable jobs that they had while they were studying, just because it is so tricky. That’s okay. You don’t have to be a full-time herbalist any more than you need to be a full-time musician, even though both of those practices are totally all-consuming.

So, there’s the practical side of things that I’ve seen a lot of overlap. However, in studying a holistic healthcare practice, I have learned to be more professional. I think that I was just freewheeling as a musician quite a bit, and now I think I’m a lot more considered about the way I interact with people out in the world. It has just made me grow up, to be honest. I have to think about other people’s experience a lot more.

Part of the beauty of sitting in front of–we call them patients, you guys would call them clients in Canada, I think–part of the beauty is that you get amazing insight. I’ve got an amazing insight, and I continue to get this amazing insight into human nature. Because just listening to people tell me not only their medical history, but their life history… just to see how they relate to their own bodies, and they relate to other people in their family, and their friends and stuff like that, because that all goes into the treatment plan. So, basically, I think that I’m a lot more compassionate and understanding of people than I’ve ever been.

That helps, that definitely helps, when I come up against, I don’t know, a challenging situation with a promoter, or even just a fan who’s just… Or not a fan, but an audience member who is, I don’t know, who doesn’t get social cues, maybe isn’t so good with boundaries, maybe is crossing mine quite a bit… I’m better at knowing what [my boundaries] are, knowing how to protect them, at the same time as being compassionate. I don’t always nail it, but I am just way better at it than I ever was before.

You’ve talked about how tough the music industry can be and about the challenges that come with being on the road. How do you keep passionate about your passion?

I’ve realized recently that, for me, music is a community-based thing. I need to surround myself with other creative people. I will feed off of their passion and their talents and their abilities, and I’ll just get excited.

I just have to continually place myself and expose myself to other people’s talent. It’s brilliant.

I don’t listen to music. We listen to music because my husband puts it on, but it’s not my natural inclination to put on music, because it’s super distracting. So, when I’m confronted with music in a live setting, it’s like, you can’t peel me away.

I think that I stay passionate by being surrounded by other people who are passionate.

Where do you find the greatest joy in your creative life?

It’s definitely on stage. It’s absolutely on stage. It’s funny because they tell you that there are all sorts of ways that you can make money in music- or “revenue streams,” is what they call it. For me, the only one I’m ever interested in is live performance. That’s the whole reason why I do this.=

I am a performer first and foremost. It took me a long time to call myself a musician or an artist, but it never ever took me a second to feel comfortable with the idea of performer, because I’ve always been a performer.

Getting up on stage and singing into a mic, I transform. I don’t know what it is. It’s just something in me, like this little homunculus inside that’s like, “Okay, time to come out!”

I just feel me on stage, all the time.

Sarah Jane Scouten recommends:

Best Pub in the British Isles: Square and Compass, Worth Matravers in Devon, UK

Favorite Nashville Songwriter: Brennan Leigh

Weird little zine about radical herbalism: Wort

Favorite all-time Canadian songwriter: Willie P. Bennett

What I'm reading right now: *The Secret World of Sleep* by Guy Leschziner

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