

On how art doesn't change your past



Musician Sarah Mary Chadwick discusses how catharsis is questionable, what it's like to sing about personal experiences, and leaning hard into your unique voice

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As told to Karim Kazemi, 2697 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Mental health](#), [First attempts](#), [Process](#).

The first time I encountered your music, the reason I clicked on it was because of the cover art, which was of one of your paintings. It depicts this humongous, grotesque, extremely tall woman with her hands submerged in the laps of two even more humongous, shirtless, extremely tall men. That image has this sort of "phone call home from the principal" quality. Like, "We need to talk about what Sarah drew in class today." This isn't to say that it's juvenile, but that if a young person were to have made it, they might get in trouble or make people worried. Is your music ever a way of hinting that you need help?

You know what? Where I'm at with therapy and shit at the moment, that actually makes perfect sense, because lately I've been thinking about how I was really good at school, but got expelled from the boarding part, and I've been wondering what was so different about those two environments that in one I was at the top of all this bullshit and basically excelling, while in the other I was in enough trouble that I got kicked out.

I've done heaps of work about when I was a really little child, but now I'm thinking about my teenage years and how fucking weird it was and how no one really checked up on me or was like, "Oh, weird. She was at the top of these subjects and then in her last year of high school, she barely passed anything." No one noticed. On some level it probably literally is just about going back to that point and demanding attention. It literally, probably is that. No one, not even the principal, ever called my mum and mum never cared.

Has your work ever, that you know of, offended people?

Definitely not to my face.

There was a song my band used to play that was really mean, about this woman I know who's still around, and I don't like her. All of a sudden, she started acting unkind, like *she* really didn't like *me*, and part of me was like: "Oh, did someone tell her that song was about her?" Because it's just really mean, this song, about how she's a boring girl who will one day make a boring wife, and I think it definitely got back to her.

On my last record, [Messages to God](#), there's [this song](#) that goes: "My mum thought my first boyfriend looked just like Jesus." When I was playing that at the record launch, I realized that Sam, the guy that it's about, was at the show. So I stopped and I pointed it out to everyone. Like, "Oh, he's here!"

I think it's fun to play around with this stuff and no one seems to have gotten too angry, but maybe it's just because I'm such an amazing person. I don't know.

I was going through old messages, reading the things that I've said to try to put my friends onto your music over

the years, and one that made me laugh was: "This is like if somebody who's just been dragged behind a train for miles has to prop themselves up and deliver the final, triumphant number in a Broadway musical." Where does your knack for theatrics come from?

When I was younger, there was a period where I got a bit diverted into thinking that creativity was divine and that you had to wait for inspiration, but as I've gotten older, I've really leaned more into the idea of just being an entertainer.

I like extravagant things and I like people that go big. I like Lars von Trier movies, things that get absolutely sick and almost beyond good taste. I like grandiosity, and I feel like if I talked more about it, it would very neatly fit into how people define 'camp.' I like being entertained and I like things that are funny and I like things that are fun.

Are you a theatrical person in real life?

As much as I'm really candid in a lot of ways, I've always been a bit funny about controlling my own narrative. I don't like people knowing my business unless it comes from me. In that way, I try not to be a dramatic person in my life, but I think that most people I know would probably laugh in my face if they heard me say that. Actually, I ran into an old friend the other day at my art exhibition, and he asked me how I was doing. I was like, "Oh, there's nothing really going on. I'm good." And he said, "Oh, you've retired, have you?"

What do you think about when other people act dramatically, when people make scenes?

It's taken me a long time to get to a place where I'm not trying to figure out why other people might not be so interested in acting out their emotions or living their lives in an honest way. When I was young, it frustrated me if someone wouldn't admit things or talk about what was going on.

So do I like it when people make a scene? I think yes—but probably, actually, unequivocally yes. I'm trying to think if there are any exceptions, and I'm like: "No, no. I would love to watch that person make a scene."

I know so little about the part of the world where you're from that I had to Google, "What do you call Australia and New Zealand together?" How do you refer to them as a unit?

Is it "Australasia?"

I think it's "Oceania?" I'm still not sure. There are so many celebrities, whether it's in Hollywood or music, who are these sort of crypto-Australians. You know their work first and then later you find out that they're Australian. What do you make of that?

I was listening to Marc Maron the other day and he was interviewing Joel Edgerton or whatever his name is, and he was like, "Ah, there's just something in the water down there in Australia," in reference to people like Kylie Minogue, Naomi Watts, Nicole Kidman or Margot Robbie. There is definitely something idiosyncratic about Australia, and New Zealand in particular, that is not accurately represented in terms of who becomes famous from those places.

Yes, there are Australian exports that do well in America, but they are very much carbon copies of each other physically. I feel like Melanie Lynskey is quite an accurate New Zealand export. As I see it represented in interviews or even in her acting, her character is like someone that, if you're in New Zealand, you might run into someone like that at the shops.

Yesterday while I was writing these questions, this song by Julio Iglesias came on, an English language song called "Moonlight Lady," and his delivery was just so totally loaded with his thick Spanish accent. I love it. One thing that I love about your music is that your Kiwi accent is always there, jutting out at odd angles. Could you choose to not sing this way?

Yes, I think it's absolutely a choice and it really frustrates me that people don't choose their own voices.

Once, I was playing in France—this was with my band Batrider in my 20s—and there was a French band that sang in an American accent, and I remember asking them about it afterwards. They were like, "Oh, we sing in English because French is in triplets and English is in iambic pentameter, and so it's easier to sing with rock music." At the time I thought it made sense, but in reality I think they just really wanted to be famous. I think that was a bit of bullshit.

In Australia in particular, I really don't like when people sing all in an American accent and then always do their Os in Australian, so a word like "home" will really leap out. I can understand the desire to make your work palatable, and therefore more marketable. But to me, especially when the songs are already personal, it's just kind of an odd point at which to depersonalize what you do.

I think, for women, it's different because there's less latitude for having what's defined as a conventionally 'good' singing voice. No one would ever say that Neil Young has a bad voice, but he has a very strange voice. Whereas with women, you have to sound like Adele, or else you kind of can't sing.

I read somewhere that you don't believe in such a thing as the "perfect" vocal take. As a result, your records are often charged with whatever was going through your voice at one particular moment, and there hasn't been too much of an attempt to sand that down. How do you decide when something is done?

I tend to work with a deadline. I work a lot with the prospect of being embarrassed if I'm not prepared. I'll pick a time when I have to be done by, and I tell myself I can use my time however I like, but there is going to be a point at which I'll have to sit down with someone and show them what I've gotten up to. It's up to me if it's enough or not.

In another interview, you said that as a kid, you were a really prolific reader. Were you reading fiction?

I read so many books, but I also read some things obsessively, over and over again.

I made this record that's just me and a pipe organ that's called The Queen Who Stole The Sky. I took the title from a children's book about a really demanding queen who kept asking for more and more and more from the king, and then her last request was that she wanted a dress made out of the sky, so then he pulls down the sky and then the world's kind of fucked.

One book in particular, a young adult novel called The Poetry Girl by a New Zealand writer Beverley Dunlop, was about a young girl in New Zealand who read poetry like Tennyson and Keats to escape her life on the farm while her parents were fighting, which in retrospect was literally just like my life. It's only occurring to me now—how that literally was my life.

That book looms so large in my psyche. There's a line in one of my songs that goes, "Sometimes I wanna clench my fists / leave red crescent moons in my palms," because that's something the girl in the book does. All those funny books that I read then really do play into my creative process now.

When you give creative expression to painful memories, is that a way of clinging to them, or are you unburdening yourself by finding a way to set them down?

It might be neither.

Growing up, I only had one brother, so there were very few witnesses around to validate my recollection of things. I rehash the past in my work—I keep repeating things and repeating things and repeating things—because, on some level, I really don't know if it's true or not.

The word "catharsis" gets thrown around a lot when people write about my music and I don't agree with that at all.

It's difficult for me to think of something that achieves actual catharsis. Actually, I feel like catharsis is this almost pretend idea—something totally made-up. I don't think there is ever one process or one experience that you can have that would completely relieve you of something.

Obviously, people's experiences of having a family are far from universal or uniform, but almost everyone has a family of origin. Yet, popular music is almost exclusively fixated on romantic entanglements, rather than the ones we might have with, say, parents or siblings. Why do you think that is?

I think that there's something kind of inherently gauche or embarrassing about talking about your family. I remember when I was maybe twenty, being at a bar with my then-girlfriend who was twenty-five, and eavesdropping on this much older woman as she went on about her family troubles. We were like, "Oh my god, if I am still going on about my parents when I am that age, just literally kill me." And then of course, I'm forty-one now and still more or less knee-deep in it.

I can't help but answer this through a psychoanalytic perspective, which would say that in addressing our lovers, in real life or in art, we are addressing our parents, too. For example, my reaction to something that my partner Simon says has to go through a filter of me thinking Simon's not my dad, Simon's not my mum. But on some level, I am talking to them. I've come to think that romantic relationships are not a placeholder, but are themselves an analysis: this constant "trying to figure out who exactly you're talking to" kind of thing.

Your last album was called Messages to God, the one before that was called Me and Ennui are Friends, Baby, and the one before that was called Please Daddy. A lot of your projects seem like they were conceived as a form of direct address to just one person. I'm also thinking, at the opposite extreme, of this hilarious aside from your song "Makin' it Work" where you sing, "I'm talking now to anyone!" What draws you to this form? Why let the listener know who they were intended for?

I definitely don't write songs with the intention of impressing someone, nor do I write things with the intention of sending someone messages through the ether. When I was younger, and I wanted to hook up with someone, I would—but you have to do that!

The record that I made that's coming out this year might be my favorite one so far. It's really sparse, and I feel like there might be a lot of space for someone else to do more with it. The record's finished, so I don't mean this in the production sense, but that I can't stop thinking what it would be like if someone else wanted to sing it. It's almost like giving away your favorite jacket. You've worn it to as many things as you can. It's yours, but it's now for somebody else. It's not that you don't like it, but that it might be someone else's turn to have it. You have total affection and respect for it, but your interest in it is just kind of complete.

I have to put blinders on to the fact that the things I've made are out there—and people can do whatever they want with them—because if I really cared about that, I just wouldn't do it at all.

Sarah Mary Chadwick recommends five young adult books to get you through life if your family sux:

The Poetry Girl by Beverly Dunlop—A lonesome, intelligent twelve-year-old girl finds solace from familial tumult in poetry.

Tripswitch by Gaelyn Gordon—Another classic YA novel from New Zealand. Three girls must discover their magical powers to thwart the schemes of their malevolent aunt.

The entire Sweet Valley High series, created by Francine Pascal—What better refuge from the turmoil of rural, alcoholic New Zealand during the 1980s farming crisis than the sunny sanctuary of Sweet Valley, California!

Scarlett by Alexandra Ripley—The appropriately maligned but compulsively read (by me) sequel to *Gone With The Wind*. My father was Maori, so I should've been more concerned with how racist the times described are, but with Vivian Leigh's face in mind, I was too blinded by Scarlett O'Hara's bloody-mindedness, her doggedness, to care.

George's Marvellous Medicine by Roald Dahl—As a kid, I would spit in my Dad's wines in lieu of poisoning him. This book spoke to me on a profound level.

Name

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Vocation

musician and artist

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