

On finding your focus



Musician Sasami discusses staying healthy while creating emotional art, the difference between being difficult and being specific, and giving your art the space to become its definitive self.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2430 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Mental health](#), [Process](#), [Day jobs](#).

I was struck by your new album's ability to process and express what some might call "challenging" emotions, dealing with anger, aggression, or frustration in this nuanced, honest way. Do you feel that creating art that deals with those kinds of feelings forces you to operate differently as an artist?

It was definitely a challenge to take these traditionally heavier, more metal, heavy rock, or industrial sounds and marry them with an access point that was melodic and not screaming. But I got to a point that I feel pretty proud of. I was really hoping to create an emotional experience for the listener, but not presuming that people would get it necessarily.

With my first album, I had not made it with any intention for other people to hear it. I wasn't trying to be experimental. [I was] writing these songs from a very novice place and I was shocked to see how many people related to them. So I already have this experience of knowing that if I have an emotional experience with my music, most likely because human emotion is so universal, other people will have some response to it. So I think that I was just trusting my own emotional guidance in making this album that hopefully other people would have some reaction to it.

Right, and how powerful is the simple art of just trusting your gut. Then, do you consider the listener's journey through that process as compared to your own?

I tapped into a lot of my experience as a music teacher where so much of the job is trying to keep other people's attention and create a whimsical journey. Basically, one music class is about the same amount of time as an LP, so I have a lot of experience keeping people's attention for 40 minutes.

We're in an era where playlists are so prevalent. And because of streaming people are exposed to different genres and sounds that they wouldn't be if they were just buying CDs or records of artists they already know. People are open and ready for a more broad, dynamic experience.

After touring my self-titled album, I got a lot of feedback that the live set getting heavier and heavier was really unexpected. I wanted to bottle some of that and tap into that heavier rock energy on this album. Ultimately, making songs is like having children: no matter how much you say, "I want this to be a heavy rock song," or, "I want my child to be a classical pianist," or "I want them to be a dentist," you can't force them to be something they don't want to be. The only thing to do is support them. For the song "Tried To Understand", I really willed it to be this heavy rock song, but at the end of the day, she was like, "You know, I want to be a Cheryl Crow country folk pop song." And so as a good mother, I just shepherded her into the direction that she wanted to be. And then it's my job basically as director of the film that is my album to make a narrative that fits all these scenes together. And to me, it's a movie that's a dark comedy thriller or something like that.

You can get too precious and not know when to move on.

Exactly! It can be really frustrating and there is an element of due diligence and not being thwarted by something being difficult. But at a certain point, you just realize that it's not meant to be. When it stops being fun for me, or when it starts feeling inauthentic, is when I have to step back and have some perspective and try something different. For me, it's about a longevity of endurance for creating art. I don't want it to be an experience that feels at any note unnatural or forced.

If you wear makeup, you hit a point where if your foundation is starting to crease, you can't put on more foundation. You have to literally wipe your whole face clean and start over. It's the same thing with songs. It hits the point where you're like, "I need to start over and it's okay." That's a humbling experience.

Right, the more you push, the deeper the crease gets. How has developing that mechanism in your art been helpful for your sense of self or your personal life?

Making and performing this album is actually such a physically taxing experience. Kyle Thomas engineered it with me and helped play a lot of the music. He and I listened to the music so much, and the physical frequencies of listening to this genre of music can be really damaging and extreme. Listening to "Skin A Rat" a hundred times is really taxing. Performing it live and running around the stage too. I have a very demonic theatrical stage presence with this performance. Because the process of making and performing this music is so extreme, it's forced me to really focus on wellness and self-care outside of it.

It was really helpful to be working on the Hand Habits record while also working on this record because it was so much mellower. It has also required me to listen to less music outside of the studio, even though I used to listen to music all day. I've been reading more and listening to more audio books, protecting my ears a little bit more. It's the same thing with touring. I have to run every morning at the hotel gym, I have to drink water, be really cautious, get enough sleep, and all those things.

For any type of art, having that intentionality and focus in your life really changes things. Whether that's a writer having a specific desk or an artist using a specific brush, being intentional feels respectful to the process.

And I think everyone has a different reason for creating art. I would never presume that everyone has the same reverence for their practice. Everyone makes art for different reasons and goes through different phases of their life where the art exists in tandem with their lifestyle, whether their life is in service to their art or their art is in service to their life. My last album was much more a situation where my art was in service to my life. I was processing my emotions through the art, and it was so much more autobiographical. Whereas you see FKA twigs or someone who is constantly physically training for her videos and performances, classical musicians or metal musicians who are practicing skills four hours a day, there are just different levels of practice. For me personally, it has required a lot of self preservation of my ears and my body.

When did you kick into that notion of taking care of yourself? It doesn't come easily for some people

I feel that creativity and inspiration are pretty random. The luxury element of being an artist is that so many things that already bring me joy, inspiration, calm, and meditation happen to also be professional development. Reading books, listening to other albums, watching movies, going for a hike, meeting a new person, and having a conversation are all professional development for making art and writing songs. Most important for me is just honing in on the fact that anything can be part of my practice. And again, it's like what you said with intention. As long as you have a framework that you're tapped in and letting inspiration speak to you and not getting in your own way, you can find a really healthy balance between creative practice and just living because so much of what I already do to live is part of my practice.

That makes me think about the image on the cover. I read that you came across that mythic figure of the nure-onna while learning more about your family's history and the history of Korean-Japanese relations. What does your curiosity look like? How do you jump off from an initial idea?

I wanted to have the element of chaos and shock with some of the sonic elements of the album, so it made sense for me to make a shocking avatar for the album cover. And since the snake woman character is a recognizable Japanese folklore character, I thought juxtaposing it with my own crab arms and this Korean calligraphy that my mom wrote is shocking in its own sense. I was manipulating this known image and putting a text of a culture that was oppressed by the [culture of] origin of the actual image. It was reclamatory in that way, too.

From the very beginning of making the album, I was really inspired by Lady Snowblood and Hausu. I had visual inspiration before even making the sonic elements. I was still working on the musical elements of the album while I was collaborating with Andrew Thomas Huang who did the cover art. It was all happening in tandem.

I love that you used the word focused earlier. Did you find yourself needing to break out of any old habits in order to find that focus?

I was being so experimental and inventive, personally. I'm not saying I invented anything, but it was new for me to put these things together that don't usually go together, like nu metal elements, but not screaming, and having a melody over it, or having these folk rock elements with synthpop and slap bass. I was purposely juxtaposing things that don't normally fit together. It was much more of an intentional thing as opposed to a stream of consciousness.

I've had to exercise a lot more patience with myself and deal with the frustration of the fact that it was going to be more of a long-term success, as opposed to my first album where I wasn't trying to invent anything or try anything experimental. I definitely had to shift my process in terms of slowing it down, which was difficult for me.

What are the elements that you need from the people that you're working with in the studio? You have a great cast of collaborators on the record, like Meg Duffy from Hand Habits, Laetitia Tamko of Vagabon, and actress/comedian Patti Harrison.

It's a blessing and a curse to be a solo artist because it's a lot of emotional, psychological, and physical labor to have to make all the decisions for your business, to be the boss of people, and all those exhausting things. But at the same time, you have the luxury of building a new band every time that you create work. So for me, when I was making "Skin a Rat" and needed it to squeeze in with heavier songs, I was like, "I'm going to hire the Megadeth drummer [Dirk Verbeuren] to play on them." And then for "Not A Love Song", which to me is a lot more ethereal and cosmic, I was able to hire Jay Bellerose, who's an iconic jazz drummer. It's a luxury to be able to hire the most skilled or appropriate hands to build every scene that I want to build, and then bring in my friends, like Vagabon, Patti, and No Home, whose voices I really wanted to be reflected in the work. Ultimately I'm making work for people in my community and I want those voices to be present in the album.

Some see solo artists operating in a lonely, isolated sphere. But that's a really old school way of looking at it. Collaborative solo efforts, if they're done well, harness and build from who you are already.

Every artist has a different way that they want to create. Look at David Bowie. He brought in different bands for each album, different producers, different performers and players. And then some people play everything on their album and they record it themselves. No way is better or worse. Art comes from what the artist's vision is. I definitely could have a reputation for being bossy or direct, but typically people are excited to work with someone that is just really specific, and I'm very specific.

What was the point in the process where the business part of the music industry took over? Does that point differ dramatically from project to project?

Definitely. If I'm a cartographer and I'm making my map before I even set on the journey, the version that I hear of my song is a million-dollar version. And then I come down to earth and do my best to build the same emotional dynamic narrative, but with a much smaller budget and with different resources. Kanye [West] has millions of dollars where he has 20 producers on staff, constantly making beats and clearing samples, but not everyone has that scenario.

And it doesn't necessarily mean you're better for it. Some people find real freedom in limited resources, a power in necessity.

I don't think that I've ever been grateful for not having more money to make stuff, to be honest. My vision is always the million-dollar one. But I do think that having deadlines and having a cycle is helpful for me because you can just keep working on a project forever. Some people take a really long time, but I think I'm more interested in making a lot of stuff and constantly working and evolving and doing new things.

I'm also really privileged to be able to not have another job and to just constantly be hustling and doing music-based work. So I try not to get too discouraged by it because it just burns too much energy that I could be using to make art.

Can you imagine if we had better community-based resources and healthcare resources? But until then, the business side can sometimes feel like this shadowy necessity for indie artists.

At the same time, most people who make art wouldn't even survive doing a different job. So I think most of us are just in deep gratitude that it's possible. And I think that gets manipulated by other people because we're going to do it no matter what.

Sasami Recommends:

Book: [Left Hand of Darkness](#) by Ursula K. Le Guin

Food: kimchi

Nature: [Palos verdes tide pools](#)

Style: wearing puffer coats in LA

Music: The album [Sandy](#) by Sandy Denny

Name

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Vocation

musician

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