

On making art in an overwhelming world



Musician Searows discusses self-doubt, thinking about lessons you've learned and being inspired by life and death

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As told to Elena Saviano, 1561 words.

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I would love to hear about the title of your newest record Death in the Business of Whaling.

The process of finding a title came after the whole album was already done. I wanted to wait until something just happened to work and sound right. I was looking through books in my house, and my partner read the line from *Moby Dick* that says, "There is death in this business of whaling." It was such a striking sentence, and the whole chunk of text around it was so beautiful and resonated so much with what the album had turned into.

There is something really disarming about your approach to songwriting. There's a vulnerability that inspires vulnerability. And there's also a beautiful agony to the whole experience. Death, as it stands in the title, also implies life. Does that feel resonant in what was coming up for you while producing this?

Absolutely. I tend to write about vulnerability and things that feel distinctly human: the things that scare me about being a person and being alive. Death is absolutely one of those things. I think of it less like an abyss and more like a part of life and birth.

In that same vein, the progression of the songs on this record seem to represent a cycle of recreation. Would you consider yourself a spiritual person?

Yeah, I have learned a lot about what spirituality can mean. My dad is an atheist and a very scientific person. For a long time, I didn't really have any belief, even if I wanted to, that there was something else other than us as physical human beings on earth. I was stuck believing that when we die, there's just nothing. I've developed a lot more of my own ideas around it, and I definitely am someone that thinks that absolutely anything could be true. The amount of cycles that repeat in the world already, that we can physically see, are so abundant. The idea that we just continue onto a different cycle just really makes sense to me.

Art is probably the best vessel for the exploration of all of this. How would you describe your relationship between notions of spirituality and art? How has that relationship changed over time?

Both things have developed together in a sense. Of course, I've gotten older as I've written songs, but it definitely shows up in how I write. I tend to write more about myself and my life in much more abstracted terms and stories. There's something really special about making a myth of your life and of the lessons that you've learned from whatever has happened. Even though I didn't grow up in a religious environment, seeing Bible stories or stories about things that didn't really happen but represent a greater lesson from a distanced or objective standpoint was very inspiring for how I've developed writing songs.

I love the word "myth" to describe this plane that your work lives on. It feels like you're expanding on themes that you brought to life in your earlier work and sonically, it feels like you're taking more risks with this record. How does this work feel different than what you've made in the past?

There was a lot of learning and adapting on how to make an album in this way. My first album was so solitary. I didn't get to explore all the creative avenues that I wanted to, because I was so focused on how I could record a song and mix it so that I sound like I know what I'm doing. With this one, there was a lot more freedom to make something as big as I wanted. And there was less control, because I didn't get to take anything home with me. I couldn't take the mixes that we did that day home and listen to them a million times. That was a big benefit of not doing it all myself. I think I always write in a melodramatic way, and I've always wanted it to feel really big instrumentally. This was my chance to really do all of that.

I can't help but imagine you making these songs in a sprawling forest. You're from the Pacific Northwest and still live in that area, so I want to ask you specifically about the sounds of growing up there. Did the things you hear inspire the way you create your own sound now?

Yeah, definitely. There's so much vast nature, even in the middle of the city, and the artists that I was listening to when I was growing up were very influenced by the Pacific Northwest. They were very Portland-esque artists. So that evolved and passed itself onto me. But the sound and feeling of the coast of Oregon felt so important to the making of this album. I have always felt very moved by it. It's such a crazy thing to exist in the same place as us. The ocean feels like such a creature, or a beast. And there's a lot of oceans, but the ones in Oregon are so dark and windy. The ocean is terrifying, really. There's sharp rocks jutting out. I also spent a lot of time in Santa Cruz growing up, and that's a completely different feeling of watching the ocean. It's a completely different vibe. In Oregon, there's the ocean, and then the tree-line going above it. It's so daunting and so intimidating but so beautiful.

Those landscapes absolutely inspire belief in something bigger, to reference back to the idea of spirituality. You cite the ocean as a specific influence for this record. For your last projects, was there a different aspect of nature that drew you in more specifically?

When I think about *Guard Dog*, it feels more inspired by the forest. It feels more claustrophobic. Where I was living at the time, for part of the recording process, was my parents' house in suburbia. There were a lot of trees, but it felt isolated: far less open than an ocean. It's funny, because when I was recording this past album, I was literally in the forest. That's where I was recording. A barn in the forest. So when I think about recording *Guard Dog*, I was living partially in downtown Portland, so the sounds of the elevator rattling my whole building are literally in some of the songs. You can hear it. Making these two albums was not the same process at all.

It's so beautiful and metaphorical to compare these two landscapes with your career trajectory. When you think about how you were introduced to music and your relationship with it now, what comes up for you?

When writing music, I was trying to fit into genres or imitate artists when I was a teenager. Growing up and listening to a lot of folk and very Pacific Northwest artists made me, at first, not want to make music like that. It wasn't necessarily a conscious thought but it was like, that's what my parents listen to. I wanted to be Grimes. But at the same time, my dad was the one that showed me Grimes, so I was still influenced by them. It took me a while to figure out what I actually wanted to write about. There's also a way of writing songs that I can't really escape. Maybe that has to do with the age that I'm at. I still feel very new at all of this.

Of course you'd be influenced by all of that. It's no secret that right now, the world is confusing and painful and very complex. There has never quite been a time in history that wasn't strenuous and complicated, but how does it feel to be an artist right now? What does it feel like to be creating something that unites people in any way, big or small?

There's so many different conflicting feelings involved with making art: with doing anything, but with making art specifically. This job is something that I have always wanted to be doing, but I'm always focused on doing my

job. All the time. It's hard to feel like you're actually doing anything useful, but I think a lot of people might feel that regardless of what they do. And it's so bizarre that so much of music is social media. So much of the news is social media. Everything is everywhere all the time. It's overwhelming, as is everything. But I have always believed in the power of art and the inherent political power that music has, even if I don't feel like I know how to make something that has the direct intention of being political. It's a big and heavy task, but making art in general is also always influenced by politics and by the world that you're existing in. There's no way to make art that isn't political. My lived experience and my life in general, whether that's the privileges I've had or the things I've had to overcome, are all political in some way. It's a part of all the music that I make.

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