On finding something to say



Musician Shura discusses overcoming writer's block, creating things without simultaneously editing them, and never doing the same thing twice.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2857 words.

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I appreciate seeing that you have your own album artwork in the background on a frame.

Is that a bit embarrassing? It's something I started in the pandemic when I was really not sure if I was ever going to make another record again, and I was like, "I need to make this little wall of things I have done to remind me that I've done them and I'm doing it," and I call it my little affirmation wall.

***I Got Too Sad for My Friends* is your first album in six years, and it has a very different sound than your previous two. I know you wrote at least one of the songs at home on acoustic guitar during lockdown. To what extent has embracing less synth in your production since then been an intentional artistic direction, a product of your circumstances, or just some other creative motivation?**

It's a real mix. What I became known for with the first record, synth pop, was actually new for me. I had always written on acoustic guitar. My songs, before I released them, had an electronic flavor because I would produce them at home, use loops, and produce beats, but they were always built around acoustic guitar. I'm not a proficient keys player, and I certainly had never encountered a synthesizer in the flesh before. It wasn't until I met my collaborator for the first two records, Joel Pott, that I really met [the Roland] Juno-106, which was the synth that became so much of the sound of my first record and a big part of the second record.

In some ways, embracing less synth is a return to my songwriting origins. It's also a product of circumstance, having moved to New York, not having had the time to move my entire studio—or the money, to be quite frank—because it's a lot of gear. I didn't even have a guitar to begin with. I had to ask Torres to borrow her guitar, so she ran around in the middle of the lockdowns, and we did a distanced exchange. I say exchange, but I gave Torres nothing in return. I was just like, "Thank you. I finally have an instrument."

In terms of textures, which are very different on this record, it was just where I needed to live, the space I needed to occupy. I needed things that felt natural, warm, tactile. The natural world was really calling me. And it was certainly the kind of textures I was listening to at that time. I've talked a lot about how Cassandra Jenkins' record [*An Overview on Phenomenal Nature*] massively influenced the world I was in at that time.

Hearing you talk about going back to your roots makes me wonder if you've been doing any songwriting in the time since. If you have, has it veered more toward the sound you have on *I Got Too Sad for My Friends* or on *Forevher* and *Nothing's Real*?

This stuff I've been writing, it's still in the world of this third album, but also, everything starts off in that world because of how I write.

Every time I get to this stage in the album process, I'm like, "I'm never going to make an album ever again. I

don’t want to do it. This is a completely mad endeavor. Why am I doing this when no one is asking me to? It is not like I have millions of people clamoring for a Shura record, and yet here I am putting myself through this process.” But it’s been interesting because I’ve been listening to a lot of pop music in the last couple of months, maybe as a kind of antidote to the world that I’m in right now and I’m like, “Oh, maybe I need to make some pop music again.” And then I’m like, “No. No more albums. Stop it.” But I’ve never really known where I’m going next until I’m already halfway there.

I’m interested in the idea that you’re always like, “No, I don’t want to do another album.” How do you reignite your creative spark?

The difference between the creative spark reigniting and what happened [in the years before *I Got Too Sad For My Friends*] was that this was the first time I experienced what people would call writer’s block, the inability to write. There was nothing going on in that way in my brain. Whereas in the past when I’d finished *Nothing’s Real*, I was like, “Oh, I never want to do that again,” it wasn’t so much that I didn’t have stuff to say or I wasn’t writing. It was just the experience of touring a record for two years and everything that happened was exhausting, and I was like, “Wow, I am just tired and I need to sleep.” In that moment of peak exhaustion, the idea of doing it again is horrifying.

What was different here with this album was that I was midway through a tour, so I was excited about playing these songs, about playing the record, and that sort of stopped. And I knew that meant I probably should use this time, this break, to write, because it’s not often that you get that break. You’re either recording, touring, or doing promo.

I said, “It’d be really useful now to write a lot.” And I just couldn’t. I had nothing to say. The only way I describe it to people is, I felt like my brain was a brick. The brain itself had calcified, and the particles weren’t moving, and the synapses weren’t firing. Anytime I tried, anything I began to say or tried to say just seemed awful, and I hated everything that I attempted to do and gave up, and then wondered if that was it. I was like, “Maybe the particles will never uncalcify,” which is, if that’s the first time it’s happened to you, quite discombobulating, and probably will be the second time it happens to me. I’ll probably be like, “Okay, no, this time for real, it’s calcified and it’s never coming back.”

Can you say more about how you transformed your mind from “it feels calcified” to “I have something to say again”?

It was a long process with several prongs. Relying heavily on my small group of peers and talking to them about feeling this way, and having them tell me they had felt this way and had come through the other side was really helpful to me. Ladyhawke, who I became very good friends with in the [lockdowns], was like, “I’ve been there. You will absolutely write another song again. Don’t panic.”

I had to let go of the panic. To this day, I still do it, walking and leaving the house, whenever I feel stuck—I got this book by Brenda Ueland called *If You Want to Write*, and she mentions the importance of walking and having that time to just observe and think. Observation and feeding my brain that way is something Katie Gavin would talk to me about, the idea of objective observations and writing them down.

One of the things I struggle with, which is also in Brenda Ueland’s book, is editing before you’ve even written it down. You have the thought, you go to write it down, and you’re like, “No, that’s a terrible thought. Don’t even bother writing it down.” I learned to quiet that voice and be like, “No, just write everything down.” Right now, that may not feel or sound interesting or feel like a lyric, but with time, you’ll go back and be like, “Actually, there’s this one tiny fragment that has nothing to do with this song that I’m writing. But for some reason there’s an image there or something that really fits.”

Maybe that’s also why nature and the textures of this record are the way they are, because I would go on these walks and sit down on a park bench, write down everything that I could hear, see, and smell, and just sit. If I think of “Richardson,” just feeling the air move across my face as a lyric would’ve been something that I wrote down in my notepad. When I wrote that, I probably was like, “Oh, why am I talking about the wind? God.”

As I’m hearing you talk about this, I want to ask, how do you edit?

I’m working on lyrics right until I record the final—I will have a draft, an early draft, and sometimes, there will be space for a second verse that I don’t have yet, and I’ll either leave a gap or copy the first verse twice. Sometimes, you’ll write a song and the whole thing will come out. And yes, you’ll tweak certain words and go, “Am I trying to force a rhyme here where there doesn’t need to be? Is there a more interesting word that doesn’t rhyme?” Those kinds of things. Sometimes, I’ll be like, “Why is verse two not coming?” How I’ve learned to deal with that is that, “Okay, verse two isn’t coming for me. I can’t force verse two,” so I have to let it arrive at me.

Sometimes, there will be songs [for which] I finish the lyrics years later. I try not to listen to my own music until time has passed. It’s like, “Maybe I should have put that word in there.” But I think it’s because I studied English literature, for me, the most important part, the bit I get the most out of as a consumer of music, as an enjoyer of music, is the lyrics. So for me, I really care. I try things out, I try different versions, I will sing different versions, and it’s a sort of long process [that] feels like I’m excavating dinosaur bones with a little toothbrush.

Why did you move back to the U.K., and how has doing so affected your creativity? How has it affected your relationships with the friends you’ve mentioned, none of whom live in the U.K.?

Coming back here is primarily a financial decision, to be honest. I was spending a lot of money on an apartment in New York, which is a city I love, and I couldn’t enjoy all that New York has to offer, including my friends who were there. We couldn’t hang out. It made sense to come back here.

It’s been interesting making a record where place, the idea of place, is a big character. So many of those places are on the other side of the world. I have friends who are creative, but I don’t think I’ve ever had a clique or a crew in music. I was really excited about moving to New York because there are so many incredible musicians there. I was signed to a label that started in America, and I was excited to tap into the creative sphere there. I definitely did make friends, and my life sort of revolved around The Lot Radio just because of the timing of when I got there and it being [lockdown]. It felt like I never got the opportunity to really explore what a full life as a creative person would be in New York. I feel like I have unfinished business that I’m not remotely interested in finishing for at least four years.

Do you have an overarching principle or philosophy for navigating change as an artist?

It’s funny because I’m thinking about a lyric in “Ringpull,” which is like, “I’m scared of change. What if you arrive and all I do is change?” I think, not being neurotypical, change is a challenge in some ways, in terms of my routine, my environment, which is why I sometimes push myself to do the thing I know I’m not comfortable with.

To rewind a bit, for this album, it was really important to me to not do the same thing again. I didn’t want to make a third album and make it with the same writers, the same producers, and tour it in the same places. By the time I’d gotten to the point where I knew I was able to make a third album, I had this voice in my head going, “What if you never make another one?” At the end of it all, I don’t want to say, “I did the same thing three times.” I wanted to do things I’d never done before, and I wanted to experience creative discomfort.

Even though I was signed to a major label on the first record, which sounds terrifying, I had a very fortunate experience. I had put out a song, it went viral. I was more or less left to do what I wanted because [the label’s mentality was], “Clearly, she has an idea of what she wants to do, so let her finish it.”

I wanted to experience what it might be like to push myself. I had experienced this discomfort. It sounds weird. I spent a year or two being sad in New York, and I was like, “You know what? More pain.” But it wasn’t painful. The change brought me so much joy, and maybe that’s the lesson. I am absolutely terrified of change, but when it happens, it’s quite joyful.

I cried in the studio the first day we all played together and we were recording live together, because it was something I'd never done before. I remember going back into the control room and listening to a take, and I'm singing live even with everyone playing. I was like, "Is this us? We sound so good." I'd never experienced that before, and I just wanted to make sure I did it just in case.

Any motivation to keep going is still a motivation to keep going.

Yeah, and also to do it in a way that—to really just go for it. Tomorrow is not guaranteed for any person, so it's like, what do you want to make sure you've done? I want to hear Hammond. I want to hear clarinets. I want to dress up in armor and walk up a Welsh mountain in the freezing cold. I think a lot of it is also bringing joy to the inner child, the kid in you who wanted to be a musician, who wanted to do this—what did they want to do? Because actually, they're not traumatized yet. They haven't experienced a pandemic. They haven't been dropped in the middle of a tour.

If you've done *The Artist's Way* or anything like that, it's that pure version of you, that hasn't had all that creative baggage, that makes you the editor of your own thoughts. It's like, what does Shura who's seven years old want to make? A lot of it was tapping into my inner child and the joy, because I think for any musician who's been in the industry for a while, you discover it's not always fun and it's a difficult job, and we are blessed to be able to do it.

Shura Recommends:

5 things that take a really long time
The Art of Practicing Deferred Gratification

Cataloguing and Organizing *Magic The Gathering Cards* (or anything you collect).
With the world feeling increasingly chaotic I like to organize things that I am able to control. I find it satisfying to cherish physical media in an increasingly digital world.

Making Marcella Hazan's 6 Hour Bolognese.
This will transform your life. I recommend quadrupling the recipe so that you can eat an enormous portion the day you cook it and then freeze the rest for when you want Marcella's Bolognese but don't have six hours to make it.

Play *The Last of Us Part 1 & 2* (or watch the show if you're not a gamer).
I first encountered the game when I watched my twin play part 1 (it was too scary for me - although I did end up playing both in the pandemic). I remember thinking that the story was so great that watching him play felt like watching a great tv series, which it now also is.

Becoming a Muscle Mommy
I watched *Love Lies Bleeding* and became inspired to get strong. I didn't realise when I began, that what I thought would take six months, would in fact take closer to six years. Exercising is a non negotiable part of my life to try and keep my bad brain days in check but it's also very exciting being able to open most jars now.

Making An Album (or any Art).
Going from sketches of an idea to a completed project is often a long and complex journey. In my case - 6 years. Deciding when something is finished is perhaps the hardest part of the process but it's maybe the most important. Complete the thought. There's no such thing as perfect (except maybe the Bolognese recipe).

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Vocation
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Sophie Williams