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As told to Mary Retta, 2634 words.

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# On expanding your vision of success

Musician Tasha discusses gratitude for when a project ends, making big career pivots, and life as a DIY musician.

**Could talk a little bit about your songwriting process and where you draw inspiration for writing the songs?**

It happens in bursts for me. I find that if I'm playing guitar and staying attuned to my emotional world and also my physical world around me, if I want to write a song, I can usually. So if I am thinking about an album, I usually have some sort of theme simmering in the back of my mind. But the songs themselves don't become clear until I'm actually sitting there writing down the words. And it's very hard to do a songwriting process for me in a pre-meditative way. It feels forced and corny usually, and not good.

I find songwriting to be the most honest and the most fulfilling when I sit down and venture to contain a feeling that I'm having, and just let the song be whatever that feeling is that I'm attached to in the moment. Then I'll do that again, and then I'll do that again, and then I'll start to see the threads.

**How do you know when you're onto a bigger project like an album, and then how do you know when it's done?**

I feel like they tend to be attached to some sort of realization that I'm having about my life. And I think I'm just an emotional person. Because songs to me, it's more about creating a capsule for a moment in my life and wanting to hold on to an experience or a feeling that I'm having because it feels important in that time. And then having something later down the road that I can look back on and turn to is like, "Oh, this is that moment when I was processing that thing." And maybe as those come together into a project, the ending is known to me when I feel like that emotion or that experience or that revelation has maybe been wrapped up a little bit and I'm moving on to the next phase or the next moment of my life.

**How does it feel to be writing about an experience or an emotion when you're in the thick of it, but also aware of being able to move past it and look back on it?**

I was actually also just talking about this recently because of being on Broadway right now, which is this huge thing and not something I ever saw coming. I was talking to another friend who's in the show about the sensation of experiencing something that is changing your life—that it's big time, long-term, changing your life as you're experiencing it—and that I've never experienced something like this before, and I don't know if I will again. But in this moment, everything about my life is different because of this experience that I'm having. And it's a very bizarre thing. It's hard to process something like that when you're in the middle of it.

But I think I'm very nostalgic and sentimental, and I think one way of keeping the doom at bay about something ending is just really treasuring how it all feels when it's happening, which I'm not the best at. And I think making a song, even if it's not about the thing that's happening to me, but writing a song in my little West Village apartment while I'm doing this run of the show on Broadway is enough of a treasure chest for me to hold onto years from now. Even if it's not about this, I know that it was made in this moment from this version of myself.

**Could you walk me through what your day-to-day or week-to-week looks like when you're in the process of making an album? Are you still writing songs while you're in ILLINOISE?**

I wrote one song which felt great. Every time I write a song, it feels like this alchemy. I don't know what magic happens to make it come out, but it does. And also, when I start writing a song, I have to

finish it. A couple of times this has not happened, but most of the time if I start writing a song, I'm like, "This is the song, and I have to see it through to the end. I have to write the whole song."

**In one sitting?**

Yeah, because I get too excited and I don't want to wait to see how it ends. I want to know how it ends now.

**That's incredible.**

When I was working on this album that's coming out, I went to Michigan to a friend's place, which I've done a couple of times. A lot of Tell Me What You Miss The Most was written at the same house in Michigan and a few songs from this album. But I was there with the purpose of writing. And so I would wake up and have my coffee and breakfast and then just sit down with my guitar.

A lot of songwriting is listening to so much music. I need it as fuel. I need the ideas and it's incredibly inspiring. I watch a lot of YouTube videos too, of people playing live, just artists I really love. I find every bootleg concert video on YouTube. I love watching those. That's also very inspiring to me. So sometimes when I'm writing, I'll just spend an hour watching videos of people playing and listening to music.

**What music do you return to or has it been different across different albums? And also, I'm wondering who you read when you're thinking about the language of your songwriting too.**

I remember this past album cycle, I was returning to this Sharon Van Etten album *Tramp*, a lot. I listened to it first in college, and I remember hearing it and feeling stunned by the songs. And I think in my songwriting I was feeling particularly inspired by that this time around.

And then I have become friends with, and also become really obsessed with the band Babehoven. They're so great. They're a band that writes all the time and releases albums in what seems like a non-stop pace. But Maya Bon, who is the vocalist in that band, she is an amazing songwriter.

As far as what I read, I think I was really interested in these novels that were specifically about women and their interior worlds. And I find poems interesting to read. I think that songwriting is such an indulgent process, honestly. I can only speak for myself, but my perspective is I am sitting down and I'm telling secrets and writing about my feelings, and that feels really indulgent because I'm doing it with the expectation that somebody might listen to it eventually. And I think in order to justify that kind of indulgence, I need to also be consuming other things that feel as indulgent as that to make it feel worthwhile.

**You're from the Midwest and you write about it a lot in your music. I'm wondering if you could just speak to being in the Chicago music world and what draws you to write about the Midwest as well?**

I don't think I realized how attached I was to the Midwest until I really started leaving a lot. People tend not to care about the Midwest. You bring it up and people's eyes glaze over. It's a non-place, I think, for a lot of people. And I think that also just imbues my relationship to this place that I'm from with a lot of protection and pride.

People from Chicago, it's their whole personality. I say that with love, and as someone who is from Chicago. And this morning I was listening to Jamila Woods' album, *Heavn*, and thinking about when it came out in 2017 and how she so perfectly captures what it means to make music of and from a place.

I was thinking about this with my song Michigan that came out a few weeks ago, and I have been surprised in my songwriting process how much I emotionally return to the place that I'm from in ways that are not always obvious, or not always at the surface. And on the last album, having a song like Lake Superior, just having all of these landmarks that I just come back to whether I want to or not. It's just inside, it's inside of me.

**Would you say there are elements of performing live or being in theater that are creatively fulfilling in a different way than writing or recording an album or vice versa?**

So much. It's so amazing. I mean, there are things I miss now about playing my own music. I haven't had a day job or a salaried nine-to-five job almost in eight years or something. Having a job in theater is the closest thing to a nine-to-five that I've had, in that I go to the same place every day, and I do the same thing every day.

My career as an independent DIY artist up until this point, it's just required so much effort and work from me just personally to record the music and find the musicians and book the tour and pay for the tour and pay for the band and find a place to sleep and get to the theater and load in and set up the gear and then load it out and then drive to where. Every single piece of that I've needed to be in charge of. And it was really life-changing to experience playing music or being a performer in this way because I didn't have to worry about any of those things. I really just got to show up. And I mean, of course, performing is its own work. I still have to be engaged and present, full of feeling and play well. But that's the part I know how to do. That's the job. And when you have things like when you know how much you're getting paid and that it's enough to live off of, and you know where you're sleeping, and you know where you're going to be at work every day, it makes the music playing part so much more fun. And it gives me so much

more capacity to be present inside of it and to enjoy it.

**I'm always really drawn to artists who have very multifaceted careers, and who work with lots of different mediums. And kind of going back to what you were saying earlier about you writing a song and you know it's capturing this version of yourself, and you know you'll be a different version. Maybe three, four years ago, you didn't think you'd be this version of yourself who's on Broadway. If you were to look to the future, what is the ideal kind of balance? Do you want to be in theater, are you continuing to write music?**

I've been thinking a lot about Michelle Zauner because of what happened to her career when she wrote that book [*Crying in H Mart*], which is an amazing book, but also it completely pivoted her entire career. But it was also very clear, or from what I can tell from the outside, that she needed to write that book, and she wanted to. And because she did, it changed her life. And I feel that way a little bit about this show. I mean, it's not my show, so it's a little bit different, but I do feel like it's unlocked this thing that I didn't know was even possible. And that is really exciting, I think, because music and the indie music world, it's really easy to be jaded about it all, and it's really hard to envision a sustainable future inside of it. It's nearly impossible outside of becoming just literally famous. I don't know how anyone can do it. And I think it's actually been really reassuring to love music and love song making, and also come to realize that I can do something else, that I can be in theater, or maybe try acting, or maybe try writing music in a different way. If being in theater, playing music on Broadway, or singing or acting, if that's a way to be a successful artist, I am certainly open to that.

**That's actually really funny that you say that because I wanted to ask you how you would define success for yourself as an artist? Because it's not necessarily fame, or it's not however many albums you put out, but particularly if you're trying to work in a lot of different mediums and maintain your artistic integrity. If you look to the future, what would make you say, "Okay, I had a successful career"?**

That's a good question and something I'm thinking about a lot these days because I do have to make some decisions about my future. But this summer has felt so immensely successful to me: getting to have a job, make money playing music and singing, and not worry about having to cobble other things together. That feels like a huge success.

I'm 30 now, which is not very old, but I've kind of skated by piecing things together. And I've enjoyed it and it has worked. And I also do feel excited about the idea of having a career and having a work life that is creatively fulfilling and financially supports me and makes me not have to worry about what will come next. That to me feels like success, I think. And I mean, it's not without work. I don't imagine myself just not having to do work, but I think that I can like the work that I'm doing. I think it's maybe a lie that if you're working really hard, you can't like the work that you're doing. I think it's possible to like it.

#### **Tasha recommends**

OPI's "Big Apple Red." It's the perfect red nail polish for the end of summer and beginning of fall. Bright, juicy, exuberant. It's the season for red!

Zia Anger's new film "My First Film." I watched this in the tiny Gene Siskel theater in Chicago. It's a daring, funny, and experimental gesture of deeply personal growth and transformation. Made me laugh and cry and wring my hands in the best way.

Merit lip oil in Marrakech. I love a single product or piece of clothing that immediately makes me feel pretty as soon as I put it on. This lip oil is one of those things (not unlike the tie skirt by Brooke Callahan).

June McDoom - June McDoom. Alyssa's voice is hypnotizing and soothing, and the production on this EP is both inspiring in its sentimentality and completely enveloping in its tenderness. I listen to it again and again all throughout the year but it's especially perfect played over the speakers in a kitchen on an evening in the summer with the windows open and butter browning on the stove, a fresh peach in hand.

Italo Bailo mix by Universal Ugly. All of my recommendations are seasonal, but it makes sense - what I consume and how I behave completely changes from season to season. This mix is for anyone who wanted to have a European summer vacation but didn't. Play it first thing in the morning in your apartment to generate thrill for the day, on the patio at your friends dinner party to accompany an evening of cheeky kisses and flirting, or blasting through your car speakers as you zoom along a coast in the glittering sunshine.

Name

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Fact

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