

Sadie Dupuis on writing poetry

April 12, 2017 - Sadie Dupuis is a poet and the guitarist, lead vocalist, and lyricist for the band Speedy Ortiz. In 2016, she released a solo album, *Sluggo*, under the name Sad13.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1855 words.

Tags: Music, Poetry, Process, Multi-tasking.

How is writing poetry different than writing lyrics for a song?

It's so hard for me to answer this question, because they seem completely unrelated to me. I understand that a lot of people don't view them as at absolute odds with one another. To me it is like the same difference between someone who is a sculptor approaching choreographing a dance piece. I understand why people think there is a similarity though. When I write lyrics it's always coming from a place where I have written the music *first* and I am just trying to find something that fits what the music is dictating. Whereas when putting words on a page, it's a much more visual process for me. You only have the words to rely on and how they are interacting with one another and the music that they can generate. Also, I like the experimentation on the page. I am more interested in seeing a poem on a page than hearing it out loud. In that sense it is a more visual form for me than songwriting.

What's your background in poetry?

I wrote poetry as a little kid. I remember winning a poetry contest where I wrote a poem about peace. I can't even remember what exactly it was, but because I won this contest I was in a commercial that aired at Lowe's Theaters. I feel like the movie was *Clueless*. I read a segment of the poem for it. They took me to a house and had me pretend to be a kid on a stoop. That's the first time I can really remember any poetry.

I wasn't very involved with it throughout most of high school or when I went to college. I played music, and I was so invested in math that I thought I wanted to be a mathematician. I went to school for it. I was at MIT. They offered these short terms—it's like a January term where you get to try something different. A lot of people go on sailing trips for vacation, and this was for the kids who are really stressed out all year taking 10 physics classes. I took a short course on letters with William Corbett. He'd edited James Schuyler's letters, and I guess it was because of studying with him that I decided to take poetry classes. I got really interested and wound up using all of my time in school to write poetry. It sort of helped me decide to not pursue math and to leave MIT. I started to pursue writing as a more serious career. Corbett ran a small press at the time. I think he still does. I'd never really read a chapbook before. It was a cool first education in poetry.

Did you want to be a poet first and somehow ended up being a musician as a secondary career choice?

No. I've always played music, and knew that I would do that forever. I was double majoring in math and music. I have been playing in bands since I was like 13, and I just didn't think I was a poet, mostly because I didn't know enough about poetry to weigh in on it. My mom is a painter, and she has also written poetry. She was friends with Billy Collins. There were poets that I knew from her, but I wasn't reading poetry as a kid. I just didn't know. Then I took this Corbett class, and it opened up a world for me.

Have you done a lot of poetry readings?

I've done probably a couple dozen, but I also play a couple hundred shows a year. It is a different thing but I do like to read poems. I get to do it a few times a year. I think I have read like four times this year. They were

all great.

Do people ever accuse you of dabbling or not really being a poet?

Well, I feel like the poet thing is the cooler thing. I do sometimes think people give me more credit than I really deserve. It's like, "Oh, she's a poet, so she must be *really* meaningful." Perhaps poets are scrutinized in a way that some of my musical contemporaries are not. It has been strange to see. I did an MFA program and I'd say maybe six months into that, people starting liking my band. While all my friends were emailing 30 publications a day and sending out their poems, I was downsizing on that front and starting to book tours for my band. The same amount of visible work, but towards a different artistic end. As the years of the program went on, most of my friends had published books, and they were printed everywhere and I was kind of like, "Yeah, I'm just kind of on tour permanently." I wish I had the energy to put these poems out into the world in a more constructive way.

Is is something that you want to do eventually? Focus more on on poetry?

Yeah. I wrote a book and I haven't done anything with it. I would like to. Sometimes I'll make little chapbooks on tour. Touring is when I wind up writing the most poetry at this point. So I'll sometimes print and put together little chapbooks, but I've never published anything serious or longer.

When you're touring do you end up writing poetry because of the long hours of traveling? Or is the experience of being on the road inspiring?

It is a combination of things. I have trouble working in more than one creative mode at once, so if I'm in a phase of trying to write an album then I'm just writing music all the time and I'm *not* opening Microsoft Word to write a poem. I also cannot write music on tour, because there's not enough space to do it, whereas if you're sitting in a van with a notebook you can sort of surprise yourself with where your brain will go on a eight-hour drive. Poetry for me is a very visual medium, I've always sort of drawn and written my poems. I studied with Saskia Hamilton and she would often have us go to a museum and write. I've always enjoyed that practice of going to museums with a notebook and just seeing what I could get and touring is the best way to see a lot of museums in a short period of time. So I do end up writing a lot based on visiting museums and being inspired by the change of scenery and by experiencing different artists that I maybe haven't known before.

When you play music, even as a solo artist, you have a band. As a poet, you're entirely solo.

Right. The only time I'll ever get on a stage alone is if I'm reading poetry, which also made me very nervous for a long time. I did readings occasionally when I was younger, but when I went to grad school I was like "Oh, these are *serious* poets." They really take their reading seriously. Dorothea Lasky, for example. I remember watching a lot of YouTube videos of her performing and she's just so funny. I felt like, "I have to be funnier in my poems." The poems are these self-contained areas where I can talk about how horrible I think I am, but *really* I need to talk about how horrible I am in a way that will make other people laugh. I was in an MFA program with the poet Mark Leidner and went to go see him read quite a few times. He's hysterically funny. It's almost like he's performing a stand-up routine. When I'm writing music I try not to let the live performance dictate the recording because I think they can have their own lives. But reading poetry in public has certainly changed the way I write because I want to be funny; I want people to come away feeling slightly better.

Do you feel like you're part of a poetry scene?

I'm a little bit of an interloper, I think. Again that has to do with very early on trying to pursue poetry seriously, but then I heard a knock on another door. I love to read poetry; I love to go to readings. I still buy my friends' books. I certainly have my scene of people I know. I think if you are a touring musician, you kind of always feel like you're an interloper because you have the friends that you meet and you are part of a scene, but then you are only there two nights a year. You have your friends and you definitely know each other, but you are not as fully invested.

You said you see poetry and songwriting as very separate things. Have you ever envisioned seriously combining the two?

I would love to do a reading tour, but it's hard when I don't have a book. It's funny, I make all the artwork for Speedy Ortiz and we did do a chapbook style lyrics insert for the last Speedy record. The way that I write lyrics out is like a block of prose, so I guess I am concerned with how it's represented visually, even if it's not sung that way. We'll do a poster with the lyrics on it, and then get it printed very much in the same way you might a chapbook. I think that visual aesthetic informs the way that we package the records too. So yes, it would be cool to do some hybrid thing but, again, do people take me seriously as a poet? Probably not, because I don't have a book out and I don't publish anything. If I publish a first book, I wouldn't want it resting on the laurels of a very minor music career. I'd rather just let it stand on its own legs.

Then you could do a poetry tour.

It definitely would be cool to do a poetry tour and I always love seeing tour lineups that aren't strictly music. I've had friends go on tour where someone is a musician and someone is a poet and they're together. I also love people who mix media, people like [Mira Gonzalez](#). I feel like I learned how to use Twitter from poets. They understand how to work with an economy of words. Mark Leidner actually taught me to create a Twitter; I feel like he was really a Twitter role model. All my Twitter role models are poets.

Twitter can be a useful form of writing.

Yeah. I'm really less of a poet and less of a musician these days. I'm a tweeter at this point. [laughs]

5 Books of Poems Recommended by Sadie Dupuis

CA Conrad - [A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon](#)

Sylvia Plath - [Ariel](#)

Claudia Rankine - [Don't Let Me Be Lonely](#)

Mary Ruefle - [Madness, Rack, and Honey](#)

Wendy Xu - [Phrasis](#)

Name

Sadie Dupuis

Vocation

Musician, Poet

Fact

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