

# On finding your soft side



Singer-songwriter Maya J'an discusses working from memories, defying genre conventions, and whether trust can exist without love.

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As told to Yang Shi, 2347 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Family](#), [Beginnings](#), [Adversity](#), [Success](#), [Identity](#).

## **Can you tell me a bit about yourself?**

I'm Maya J'an. I'm a singer and songwriter. People say I'm a downward spiral documentary.

## **When did you start making music? What are your creative aspirations?**

I was born and raised in Los Angeles. Music has always been a huge part of me. My mom was a big support and put me in a band when I was really young with my sisters. I was about 6, and I started playing drums then. My sisters fell out of love with the band pretty quickly; I was only 7, but I realized I wanted to keep doing it. I started writing songs around that time. They weren't very good at all. I had a song called "Birthday Cloud," another song about mermaids, but I always dreamed about something.

## **What kind of music did you play with your sisters? What was the name of your band?**

Oh gosh, the name of our band was ATM because it's our names. We played all types of stuff. My dad is from Belize, and my mom grew up in Texas. So we listened to all types of stuff, from reggaeton to country to alternative to pop R&B. We were pretty genre-less as a band. We were kids, we just did whatever we felt like. I remember practicing a lot of my drumming to One Republic. Do you remember One Republic?

*Yes, of course. It's too late to apologize... At what point in your life did you know you wanted to become a musician?*

I went into high school and just started posting on SoundCloud. Writing's like therapy. It always has been. My mom lost custody of me when I was 9, and that made writing more of a lifeline. It felt like my last little thread to her, in a way. I became a recluse. At school, my favorite part was just to come home and sit in the garage and noodle on the piano. That's kind of where I started. Growing up in LA and seeing the entertainment part of it from a closer range, I never really wanted to do anything else. I knew that I wanted to make music. I wanted to be a writer and share my story.

## **I can tell you are very devoted to music, but also to your feelings and how these are translated through your craft.**

It's almost like you don't really know what else to do with your life [other than music]. It's the only thing I'm good at. It's the only way I can express myself. I went to college, and I tried to do the more by-the-book route for my dad's sake, but I knew that there would always be a hole in my chest if I didn't actually try. When I was 17, I asked my dad, "Hey, I'll do one semester in college, but if I'm going to try and work on this music thing, and if nothing happens within a year, I will stop." After six months, I was discovered, and I signed my first

record deal with Capitol Records.

**Did you have any mentors growing up?**

Yeah, Soulshock & Karlin. Soulshock is this amazing Danish producer, and Karlin is his partner. They found me when I was 17; I was going to the library skipping school, sending people my music. I met with them pretty early on. I'm laughing because my dad actually came to the second meeting with me, even though he wasn't a big believer in me going into music.

**What it was like growing up in LA? How does the energy of LA show up in your work or your creative process?**

LA is a bit of a void that you get sucked into... Even though I've been here my whole life, I can still find things that inspire me and bring me back to life on days when I'm not feeling great. The history here is so deep and special. Old Hollywood, all the writers and filmmakers, all the stories layered into the city. My vintage apartment sounds perfect for that energy. Just driving up Mulholland or going to the Beverly Hills Hotel, or spots like Musso and Frank—those classic places feel iconic. Even that Mexican restaurant in Studio City that Tarantino loves. It's like you're surrounded by creative history all the time.

**Yes, I can feel that energy. Everyone comes to LA chasing something. All that ambition and hope.**

I wonder if I could live somewhere else, but I'd always fall back here because it's all I've ever known. I've been to some amazing places. I love Denmark, Nashville, and other places. But I don't know. LA is just a part of me now.

**You describe your song "cul-de-sac" as a love letter to your hometown. What does the song mean to you personally?**

That song is really emotional for me. I poured a lot of memories into it, and it was actually hard to write. I'm really excited to share my music, especially my writing style. I can get very detailed, and I usually write songs like they're pages from a diary. "cul-de-sac" feels like my most vague song, and I think that's because it was such a hard thing to put into words. At the beginning of last year, a family member's house burned down in the fires. Three houses were damaged, and one was completely gone. It was a multi-generational home, so we had so many childhood memories there. It was a really strange and heavy time for my family. I'm very sentimental and nostalgic, so it paralyzed me for a while. About a month later, after I had been sitting with everything, I went into a session with my producer, Jonas Jurström. I told him what I had been going through and said I wanted to create something that felt like being inside a memory. That's where "cul-de-sac" came from.

**What about the title?**

I actually grew up on two different cul-de-sacs, so the title feels really personal to me. There's the literal meaning—the actual streets I grew up on—and then there's the more figurative side of it. That feeling of not really having anywhere to go, of hitting some kind of dead end. Not in a dramatic way, not good or bad—it just is. When I went back to see the house in Pasadena that burned down, it was really hard for me to even go down the street. I'm really visual and sentimental, and I didn't know if I wanted to see it like that. I didn't know if I was ready for that version of the memory. I think a big part of it for me is holding onto memories and not wanting to rewrite them, but realizing that I have to. As we get older, we're constantly rewriting our past, intentionally or not. We get wiser. We start to see our parents as people who were just figuring it out. All those perceptions shift over time. I've become really protective of that as I've gotten older. I'm aware of how things can change the way I see my past. So a part of me chooses softness. I choose to stay sentimental and a little romantic about things that could easily feel harsh.

**There's a real vulnerability in your voice. It made me wonder, as a singer-songwriter, how does it feel to expose yourself like that?**

My only goal is to show up as authentically as I can. It's funny, when I dropped my last single, Pocket knife,

I literally lay in the fetal position on my bed because I felt so exposed. As a writer, I'm not hiding behind anything. I'm choosing to be honest and not add any frills to make it more digestible. It really is just my diary. I also try to write for myself first. There are times when I play songs for friends, family, or the label, and I catch myself digging my fingers into my legs like, *oh god*. But that's how I know those songs are meant to come out. It's because they mean so much to me. I want to look back and know I gave real pieces of myself. The artists I connect with most are the ones who feel pure and transparent in their writing. The Mitskis, the Lanas. Angel Olsen, Father John Misty. That kind of honesty.

**I can hear Lana in your work. Being at the heart of the music industry in LA, do you feel pressure to fit a certain mold or to shape your career along a specific path?**

I did. When I was 18, I signed to Capitol, and that whole experience taught me a lot about expectations and how not to give a fuck about them. Now I wouldn't say I think about it too much. Especially as a Black woman making... I don't even know what genre I make. I just make whatever I feel like making. But as a Black woman not making what people might expect me to make, I've definitely been told I don't do things the way people assume I should. That's unfortunate, not for me, but for the people who think that way. As a Black woman, as a woman of color, even just as a writer, I'm allowed to be soft. I'm allowed to be honest. I'm allowed to do whatever I want. When I was first starting, I was having so many panic attacks because I wasn't at ease. I was constantly bending to other people's expectations. It got to a point where I didn't even want to do this anymore. So I stepped back and started writing for other people, and somehow slowly found my way back to being an artist, almost by accident.

This time feels different because I actually know who I am. I'm not as scared. People are always going to project their own ideas onto you, especially in art. It's such a delicate thing, and everyone has an opinion. That's okay. I'm almost grateful for what I went through because now I know what feels good and what doesn't. The only thing that's ever worked for me is wearing my heart on my sleeve. That's why I'm so committed to it. It's the only way this works for me.

**I'd love to talk a little more about "pocket knife." I can share what I took from it, and you can tell me if I'm completely off? When I listened to it, I felt this sense of playing with fire. It felt like a story about loving someone who embodies risk. The line about "sleeping on a pocket knife, dreaming about your life" gave me this feeling of being with someone who feels a little unsafe, but who's also very intoxicating. You choose to fall in love.**

I love hearing how you interpret it. It's really close to how I intended it. "pocket knife" is a story about trust. Can we have love without trust, and can you have trust without love? Are they interconnected? Is it a package deal? I've always had trust issues. "pocket knife" is just me saying, "I love you. I see things with you, but I'm already preparing myself for you to stab me in the back. If you do that, I'm going to be prepared and stab you back." Emotionally, of course, not physically. "pocket knife" is just a story of love and trust. You can have either one without the other. Whenever I trust someone, that's how I know I love them. Whereas love can be a little harder to define. I could love someone and not trust them... Love is such a complex thing, but trust is explainable. It comes with its own set of rules.

**Were the lyrics part of your diary?**

Yeah, for sure. The verses come from real experience. I was in a relationship that defied the norm. It was during a time when I wasn't sure if I was going to keep doing music. I was writing for other people, but I wasn't really pursuing my own artistry. I started thinking maybe this music thing isn't for me in the way I imagined, and that's okay. The person I was with was kind of reinforcing that. He was gently pushing me toward a smaller life, wanting me to settle down, be a housewife. At the time, I thought I loved him. But there were parts of me that were fighting it, and now I understand why.

It's funny. As an ambitious woman, or just someone with a little fire in her belly, you have to believe in yourself, almost blindly. Not everyone is going to see the vision. There have been so many moments where I had to choose my own belief in myself over something that looked stable and made sense on paper. It really messed with my head. But in the end, I trusted myself more than I trusted him or that relationship. I mean, if you have to sleep

on a pocket knife, how safe are you, really?

**Have you been working on your EP?**

The EP is almost solid. We're 90% there, I'm excited to share.

**If your EP had a color, a flavor, and a scent, what would they be?**

For color, a vintage baby powder blue. I would say the smell of your hometown mall—how it just smells like all the foods, all the people. Flavors, I'd say it's a mix between two different things: something that your grandma would make you that's super nourishing, and you just feel loved, but also Jell-O.

**Where do you see yourself in five years? You don't need to be humble about it. It's not that kind of interview.**

I definitely see myself with a handful of Grammys. I see myself writing for myself and other friends, constantly in the studio and inspired, traveling with Ms. Yoko, my dog. And happy.

## The Maya Starter Pack



a stack of well-loved journals



vintage dress from Trashy Lingerie on La Cienega



sheer or lace socks



a pocket knife



a cul de sac

Name

Maya J'an

Vocation

singer-songwriter

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