On being heard



Songwriter Marisa Dabice (Mannequin Pussy) discusses community and collaboration, finding catharsis, taking your time, and removing your blinders.

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As told to Maryam Said, 3057 words.

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Mannequin Pussy's evolved a lot since your last album, *Patience* (2019). You've gone through a lineup change as well as other changes. What's that been like?

I think the biggest thing that comes to mind was at the end of 2020, when [guitarist Athanasios Paul left the band]. Having the experience where you're like, "Oh, this person who's been a part of this band has decided that they no longer want to do this." It's an opportunity to invite fresh energy when you're losing a band member in that way.

[Guitarist] Maxine [Steen] was the first person on my mind when it came to inviting someone into the creative quilt and collaboration that myself, [bassist] Bear, and [drummer] Kaleen [Reading] have built together. Maxine and I have known each other for seven or eight years. The way we always hung out as friends was making music together. No one has heard a lot of the music we made together. I was like, "Oh, this is a perfect opportunity to bring in this person that I love and am so inspired by, and just see how it all works together," and it clicked.

Was it different in terms of the way that you bring ideas forward? What's the writing process in Mannequin Pussy?

For this one, it was a lot of just physically being in the same space together and starting to try things out. You get visited by ideas when you're a creative vessel. You're just like, "Okay, let's see if I can bring this one out, or see how this one feels."

Maxine is one of the more prolific people I know. She's always having new ideas and new riffs to try out. That's part of the excitement. She'll have a riff, like for "I Got Heaven," and it feels so intuitive as to what we all wanted to do with the song. It's like you're sort of playing—not Jenga because you're not taking things away—but you're building things on top of each other's ideas in real time. It was a very in-the-studio, in-the-rehearsal-space experience for us to be sharing ideas and then building on top of them in real time. Historically, there's been a lot of isolation and then bringing forth an idea [to the group].

There *is* a collective vibe on *I Got Heaven*, like everyone's on this plane of existence together when you're making things. What are your feelings after a song is finished?

Accomplished. It's so easy not to finish a song. I'm sure, as a musician, you understand the experience of just leaving something in the drafts, of leaving something in the demo phase where you never really take it out and give it a proper final treatment.

I think most songs artists begin will never be finished. I don't know about batting averages, but whatever a bad one is, is probably akin to what the process is for actually writing a song. You could have a few ideas a week, or maybe a month or something like that, and not all those songs are going to end up as a finalized song, ever

see the light of day, or be shared with people outside of your own experience of it.

Are there certain processes you've kept from the beginning, or learned from *Patience*, that you then took into making this new record?

It's really important to be open to new ideas and to be open to inviting people into the process. This was the first time we've been more collaborative. John Congleton, who produced this record, was also a part of the early writing sessions. It was my first experience going into a record where the producer was involved that early on, not just in the sense of sending them the demos and that's their jumping off point for it, but actually inviting them into the room to listen with you as the songs are developing.

John's presence was immensely welcome. The idea of having him be there seemed more intimidating to me than it actually ended up being. It was beneficial for us to have him there, to have someone sitting there, listening to us play, and being able to interject something like, "Oh, yes, you're definitely on the right path. That feels good," or "That doesn't feel as good." Giving us that feedback in realtime helped us get a song to its best possible place.

On the flip side, lyric writing is something I need to do in isolation. You need to allow yourself the space and time to retreat from other people and retreat into the work. You put your focus into it in. You're so intent on finding what those words are. Like, what are the words that need to come out? I find you really do need to remove yourself from others in order to find them.

You have a background in political science. Is that running through your head when you're writing lyrics? Is there a blending of music and politics?

Definitely. It just shows up because, I think for some of us, it's always on our minds. It's impossible to get away from. I think what's unique about Mannequin Pussy, and who we are as individuals, is that whether we like it or not, a lot of our experiences and identities have been politicized.

I would say we don't like it. I don't think anyone really enjoys trying to argue whether or not they should have the rights that they want to have, or the respect that one would have just walking into a room. I think [with] all of us, despite having very different experiences and perspectives, that is something that we all can connect on, this understanding and empathy for each other in the way that we've all been maligned or treated as an other, or had to just go through more than sometimes feels…I don't want to say fair, but yeah…It's just part of it, and it's part of our experiences.

I am very often writing from my own perspective, but the people I'm closest to in my life are people who I think deal with far greater adversity than I do. And I think that also then gets distilled into my work. When you truly love someone, you suffer with them and you feel that pain with them, and it becomes a collective arrangement that you have where you're feeling what each other is feeling. Maybe it's not in the same way, but just being aware that they are affected by these greater forces.

When you guys are playing shows, have you had fans connect with you in that way?

I think so. We were just doing an interview where they were asking about the quilt and the landscape of our fan base. Something that Kaleen and Bear were touching on was just how different the experience is looking into the crowd of a Mannequin Pussy audience versus being in the audience for all of us growing up, where, as individuals, we all felt not as represented in each of our own unique ways.

It's not something that can be forced, and it's not something we expected. It's just something that either happens or it does not. Somehow we really have been able to build this kind of community around our band where there are so many different types of people who, at the end of the day, are all chasing the same thing, which is this cathartic release.

There’s a feeling of safety in a way, like you don’t have to have this guard up.

Yeah. Every time you walk outside, I’m sure you experience it, that feeling of having to have your guard up around you. A show is an opportunity to have a space where, for a moment, you can let that guard down and fully be yourself, where people are not passing judgment. You’re all there because you’re enjoying something together that makes you part of that community for a night. It will last hopefully longer than that, but when you’re in that space, hopefully you don’t have to walk around with that sort of trepidation and knowing that you have to have your walls up to protect yourself, which is, I think, the experience of so many.

You guys tour quite heavily. What’s that been like?

We got so lucky. Looking at Mannequin Pussy, I don’t think any one would ever say, “Oh, that was an overnight thing.” It’s always been a steady build. In our own commitment as musicians and artists and band mates to each other, I think we’ve always wanted to mature and get better at what we do.

We got more popular during the pandemic. At the time that things really shut down, so many more people found us for the very first time. The first shows that we played outside of it, in later 2021, ended up being the bet tour we’d ever done. It was the most sold out shows we had ever had. There was such a noticeable difference. It was definitely something to step back and feel so appreciative about.

That was the experience we had coming out of this time where a lot of people decided that they didn’t want to do it anymore. They didn’t want to continue to be in a band because being in a band is certainly not an easy thing. It’s kind of like a socialist project in many ways.

I was having this conversation with a couple of friends when we were playing a show. They were saying how it’s interesting when the cost of living goes up, there’s more singer songwriters, but when the cost of living is comfortable, there are more bands. It is true. It really is a socialist thing, too, for sure. And it really is the fact that we have to deal with a lot of costs while touring.

You can’t do it not at a loss without a fan base. People talk about that. They’re like, “How do you make money playing music?” You have fans. You have people that want to come to your show and sell out your shows and really are part of it. But that’s not something that you can expect. And you can’t expect it to happen quickly. Like you said to me, you first found out about us in 2016. We’re talking about 2024 now, putting out another record…You just kind of keep at it.

But that’s something I talk about all the time, how singer songwriters are more like capitalists. It’s easier to sell one person’s image and identity than a collective’s—and a band is ultimately a collective. Of course, it’s easier to talk one-on-one in these sorts of contexts. But singer songwriters are hiring people and giving them a day rate, and that’s it. As a band, you are sharing in those profits and you’re assuming the risk together and everyone gets an equal slice. So it’s very alternative in many different ways.

I think it’s so beautiful, too, because it’s like you have a family, hopefully for life. It’s super sick to just think about—people who not only share this love for music and making music with you, but who you can call on and you’re good friends with, too.

I think that’s the only way to keep a band together—you have to genuinely really love each other to go through what you go through. There’s no way to fake that. When we go on tour again, we’re going to be out for the first chunk for pretty much three months straight. If you’re around people whose energies you find draining or vampiric or just don’t treat you well, that shit is going to be so much harder than just the road. You have to be looking out for each other. You have to be treating each other better than family.

It’s interesting when you’re on tour, you’re kind of like *everyone is my child and I am everyone’s child* in a way because we’re all running around trying to make things work. But if we’d go back to the creative realm, what is your favorite part of songwriting, apart from collaborating?

My favorite part of songwriting is the melody and the words. It is so intoxicating to hear an instrumental and then have that almost…it feels divinely guided. What's the divine? I don't think I could answer that, but it feels, to me, like you have this opportunity to express yourself.

I think a lot of people who get into art are people who felt like they weren't heard or weren't listened to growing up. You're like, "I need to say this, and I don't care if anyone actually hears it or not. I'm just going to reflect on these things."

It's this unlearned generational thing that you don't just black out your trauma. You're not just going to pretend like that didn't happen. You're not just going to be like, "Oh, blinders up, I'm not acknowledging that."

I think being an artist means taking those blinders off and being like, "I have to go through this. I have to actually feel this pain. I can't hide from it." I think that's something that has allowed me to grow and mature greatly. I feel like only within the last five years of my life did I start being like, "No, I have to feel pain. No, I got to go through this to get through it," instead of just pretending I'm fine.

We've been taught to believe that we have to run away from anything that's uncomfortable. We live in a capitalist society that's just like, "go, go, go, we're a machine…"

It's so true. Like you don't have time to be feeling your feelings. You gotta get to work in the morning.

Yeah, exactly. [*laughs*]

It's like that's what it is. No, you do not have time to look after yourself. You got to clock in because your boss needs you to make money for him.

Totally. And then at one point you're like, "Okay, I'm literally going to go to the freezer and cry myself to tears. And then come back and get on and keep working." I don't know if you've ever had that moment.

Oh, I have. Have I cried in a freezer, in a walk-in freezer? Yes.

I think we are blessed in a way where we can speak about these pains that we feel and then connect with a bunch of people who also feel this way. It's so nourishing when you meet someone who really is like, "Wow, your words meant this to me and it really got me through this, or I really connected with it."

When you first start to connect to art, I think your own emotional vocabulary takes time to develop. You don't truly understand your own emotions until you really start trying to talk through them and acknowledge them. Music and film and books are this opportunity to start to understand yourself through the lens of someone who's already done the work. That's why you connect to it, because they did the work to disseminate the feeling, and then you have the opportunity to grow from their experience.

When was the moment for you? When you knew you wanted to write songs?

When I was a teenager. I wanted to be in a band so badly. It was one thing I wanted so much, and it very much eluded me. I wasn't able to be in that teenage band that I always wanted to be in, but I did have very supportive parents who listened to me and observed me. But I think growing up in the early '00s, there was just a very different culture surrounding therapy and talk and emotions. It was very much this world, but a stranger one, in some ways.

Anyhow, I had a neighbor, Chris, who I took a few guitar lessons from, and when I showed up to the first lesson, I was like, "I wrote a song and I don't know how to play." I was like, "This is what the song is, this is what the melody is. Can you help me find what the guitar chords would be?" And so off the jump, as soon as I got a guitar, I didn't even know how to play it. I was just looking at it, but I was imagining myself writing songs. I never wanted to learn a cover song, I was just ready to start making my own.

What do you think the next few Mannequin Pussy albums will sound like or look like? Or I guess it just comes with time?

I could see us evolving even greater on the *I Got Heaven* work in the way that we'll continue to experiment with sound and texture and emotional storytelling. I will say, in every other industry that exists, it takes 10 years to build a reputation for yourself. It takes 10 years really for people to take you seriously and for you to learn the tools that you need to operate at your highest possible level. And that's something you continue to learn from.

Music is a strange thing where it's like your best work somehow comes when you're 22 years old. There's no other industry in the world that operates that way. I feel so privileged that MP has been this thing that's been given this space and an opportunity to grow and to get better and more focused and mature with what we do. I think that's why our songwriting has gotten better, because we haven't run out of things that we want to say or express. And we're only growing closer to each other as friends and collaborators. We're also just simply getting better at what we do.

Marisa Dabice Recommends:

The movie: *Thirst* directed by Park Chan-wook

The artist: Joe Pease

The TV show: *Love on the Spectrum*

The poetry: *Thirst: Poems* by Mary Oliver

The runway show: Rodarte FW 23 Gothic Fairy Collection

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