Waxahatchee on taking your time



May 1, 2017 - Waxahatchee is the musical project of the Alabama-born, Philadelphia-based singer-songwriter Katie Crutchfield. Her fourth Waxahatchee album, *Out in the Storm*, is out July 2017 on Merge.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2011 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Identity, Focus, Anxiety.

You wrote recently and mentioned how you connected to the interview we ran with Perfume Genius. Anything specific?

One thing I related to, and that I feel applies to my process, is the feeling of dread you get when you think you're never going to be able to make something great again, or something that you love again. That's kind of gone away for me. I used to have that all the time.

The drive to make music has always stemmed from wanting to make something that I loved, and so I was always sort of making it for myself. But that good feeling, once you do that and you have a finished product, was always clouded by this fear that I'd never be able to do it again.

As I've gotten older, and made a bunch of records, that's sort of gone away. Experience, and maybe just a little bit of wisdom, has made it go away. That's definitely progress.

Musicians are asked to be creative within a cycle. You finish a record, tour, write another record, and tour again. It's like you have to conjure inspiration to keep things moving.

I've definitely felt like that, like I've had to conjure something. Luckily, this most recent time I made a record, it was just boiling over. I needed to make it. I had everything in place to do so. But I certainly have felt that way. When you're in a cycle and have to conjure it, you surprise yourself a lot. You go places you maybe wouldn't normally go. There's value in that.

When you were writing this new record, more quickly than you had in the past, were there any things you picked up that you could imagine applying to your ongoing writing process?

With the trajectory that my career's had, I feel like I've always done things in the exactly same way. Even when I was a teenager before it was being called a cycle—it was still a cycle, just organically. As a young person making records, I would work, work, work on a record, then record it, tour on it a little bit and start over.

What feels different for me now is that because it's become my whole life and job, I've been keeping business hours. I wake up in the morning at nine o'clock, I have breakfast and coffee, do a couple things around my house, then work on music for several hours. I know myself well enough to know that I work well in the morning and I don't work well at night. I don't keep late hours. I've learned about my peak creative hours and how I've been able to be more organized with it.

One thing I picked up from people I've talked to is the idea of momentum's more difficult when you stop and rest. It's a matter of maintaining a constant flow.

When I was working on the new one, I knew when I needed to stop. I would get myself into a frustrating headspace if I pushed myself too hard and nothing was coming from it. That's another thing—there were some days where I would wake up and get going, just push, push, push past the threshold and have to stop. I'd have to give up, because I knew if I kept going it wasn't going to happen. I needed to put the guitar down, walk away, and come back with a fresh mind.

When you're writing a record that's based on personal things, like the end of a relationship, is there ever a point where it gets complicated and you want to pull back? Or when doing a record like *Out in the Storm*, do you just kind of say "screw it" and let it all out?

It depends on where you're at with the relationship, I think. That's important. I've had both experiences before, where I've said "fuck it" and just went for it. Those always end up being my favorite records that I've made, the ones where I'm like "I'm just going to be really honest here." Then there are records like my record *Ivy Tripp*, the one before this one. I love it, but I also was masking a lot. I think because of personal stuff and things I couldn't quite say. I wasn't quite ready to say a lot of the things that I end up saying in my new record.

It depends. I've always written songs that were really personal, from the very beginning. I'm always looking to achieve honesty, to articulate my feelings. I'm the most satisfied when I've been able to do that.

What's the most essential part of a song for you?

Lyrics are the thing that matter the most to me. If I feel like the lyrics are flimsy, that's usually when I'll toss something out. Even if it's like the catchiest song in the world. There were a couple songs that I was working on for this record that I threw out pretty early on because I couldn't quite get the lyrics right. Good songs, other than that. I was sending my bandmates demos when we were starting to flesh out some of the new stuff, and when I said that I was going to toss these songs out, they were confused. That's the nature of how I work; the lyrics have to be perfect.

How do you know when a song's done?

I feel like it's 98% instinct, but also experience. After you make a bunch of records, and you've been trusting that instinct for so long, you get pretty good at being like, "This feels finished." That's how I am with the lyrics. It's like they feel just right. If something's off, I always know. I'm like, that is the wrong word or that word has too many syllables. You know what I mean? Things like that. I just trust my instincts enough to be like, this is finished.

How do you avoid getting sick of the songs or burnt out by making music so regularly?

I don't know. Those experiences are so different—writing, recording, touring. It's all so different… I feel like you end up missing what you're not doing. In the middle of touring, I miss being home and working on music. When I was home working on music, I missed touring a lot. It's a weird double-edged sword.

As for getting burnt out on playing songs every night, it's funny. I play songs I wrote when I was 19 years old every single night. I hate to be so blasé about it, but it's just my job. I love singing; I love performing. I have a really great job. I suck it up and dissociate from what the song is about. I usually don't get too burnt out doing that. You're also responding to other people's energy. Having them react to what I'm doing, that experience, is a unique thing.

What are some things you wish you'd known when you first started?

There are decisions I made, even just sonically, that I regret. As I've grown older, my ear has gotten better. My ear catches things that it never would've when I was like 19, 20. There are definitely records I can't go back and listen to. Like, the P.S. Eliot record, *Sadie*, the last record we made. Sonically, I feel like it's a little all over the place. It's such a drag because I love those songs. Now, I wish I'd been more attuned to that—but, also, I was figuring it out.

I try and let myself off the hook for that. I've had a nice slow progression in my career—creatively, too. I'm pretty comfortable with it. I feel like, "Yeah, there were some hiccups. I made a couple mistakes. I wish I could go back and erase them," but I feel good about it. I feel like it's natural and happening at a pace I'm very comfortable with. I'd like to slowly

move forward with my creative decisions.

In the music industry, especially, it seems like there's a lot of people who will have quick success—a single song that does well and they'll end up on late night TV—and then you never hear from them again. At this point, the smarter, more sustainable thing to have the slow growth versus a quick burst that also has just as quick of a downfall.

Completely. That's my whole outlook. Sometimes people ask my advice, because it has been a slow thing for me. When people ask, I've just been like, "Yeah you've just got to take your time." Also, it's different for everybody. Some people want the burst. That's completely fine. That's the thing, not to harp on it.

I'm really grateful that I found DIY and punk and stuff when I did. I think that it's given me perspective. Having to do every little thing by myself for so long and having to learn about every single area of music and being a musician… It's given me a lot of perspective. It informs every decision I've ever made. My outlook is that I don't ever hire a person to do a job that I've been doing myself, unless I'm way too busy or overwhelmed. I don't get anybody in the group until I absolutely need it.

What kind of things that kind of keep you going when you're not actively making a record or writing songs?

I revisit my own music sometimes. I've been doing that a little bit lately, sort of meditating on the new record. But I don't know, I really try to always write. I try to write a lot. I try and play guitar a lot. I just try to keep the melodies happening. One good way that I do that is in soundchecks. Because we're on tour right now, when I'm sound-checking, I'm playing guitars and trying to happen upon things. I try and write little poems every single day—just stream of consciousness to get ideas out and to write in verses and things like that. To keep myself on my toes.

I also try and relax. The thing that's so crazy about putting out music, especially today, is that you work so hard on something, you put so much energy and emotional energy into it, then it comes out and literally six months later, nobody cares about it anymore. Or it feels like that. It is what it is but it's just weird.

[Merge co-owner and Superchunk vocalist/guitarist] Mac McCaughan actually told me this. He was like, "You've got to enjoy the thing that you've just made and don't rush to make the next thing. Just enjoy the thing that you made." Another person who gave me advice about this was Rose Melberg [of Tiger Trap, the Softies]. She said to me, "It's okay. You could go three years without writing a song and that's okay. You've got to let yourself have that time sometimes. When it's time to happen, it'll happen and you'll be able to do it."

I kind of carry both of those pieces of advice around.

As a creative person, I always want to do things that have an end product. That's part of being a creative person: working on something and then having this tangible thing. I feel like I'm at a point where I'm going to be excited about the record that I just made and I'm going to think about that right now and then when things start to kind of cool off and I'm not so busy, I'll start thinking about where I'm going to go next.

5 albums keeping me strong as I tour my life away by Waxahatchee:

Anti by Rihanna
My Woman by Angel Olsen
Car Wheels on a Gravel Road by Lucinda Williams
A Seat at the Table by Solange
The Woods by Sleater-Kinney

Name
Katie Crutchfield

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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Photo: Jesse Riggins