

Beth Ditto on recognizing your own talents



May 22, 2017 - For the past 17 years Beth Ditto served as the vocalist for beloved punk band The Gossip, a group she started when she herself was still a teenager. After that band's eventual demise, Ditto found herself in the uncomfortable position of being a solo artist in need of collaborators. After speed dating with a long list of musical suitors (and writing over 80 songs along the way), Ditto eventually found the kind of cohorts that not only felt right, but allowed her to truly come to appreciate her own worth as a creator. Her first proper solo album, *Fake Sugar*, will be released in June.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1970 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#).

Your previous band, The Gossip, recently ended after being together for over 17 years. What was it like to create music with new people after having worked in more or less the same way for almost two decades?

Hard. I actually don't like to sing in front of people, at least not in a small closed room with people that I barely know. I don't like writing words. I just don't find it enjoyable. It feels really awful because it's so personal. I didn't realize that until I had to do it with new people. When we started The Gossip we were just punk kids and after so many years together we didn't even really have to talk about things, we just did it. I wasn't self-conscious because none of us ever knew what we were doing. We just figured it out as we went along. Also, we were just trying to make what we thought were punk songs. It's not punk to take yourself seriously, is it? That was my interpretation of it. I somehow just didn't want people to hear what I had to say. It made me feel stupid.

Most people would probably assume the opposite, that being an outspoken front person for a punk band is all about "I have something to say, and you're all going to listen to it!"

I could say it out loud—or in front of an audience—but writing it down was so painful. I just do not like writing lyrics at all, I do not enjoy it. I know people think that's weird, but I always found it so hard...and even more so after the band ended. I just like things that feel like they naturally happen, that feel unconscious somehow. I hate anything that feels forced. That's why I also hate band practice because it feels insincere to me, it feels rehearsed... which I realize is the point! In a shitty punk band your rehearsal was usually just an actual show. You were kind of working it out in front of people.

For your new solo record you worked with a few different people, how did the songwriting/recording process differ than the way things worked with a band?

In the band it was usually just me and Nathan Howdeshell. For a lot of the band's life, we also lived together so it was easy. He'd write a guitar part, I'd make up some the words and it would just be done. It was never like, "Ugh, let me get out my notebook. Let's process some feelings." It was *so* easy. That's how I knew the band had to end because it started to not be easy anymore. We were both just like, "Why is this so hard?"

I know making music is different for everyone, but that was our experience. I think we both thought that it just wasn't *that* hard to make decent music. And honestly, sometimes we weren't really huge fans of the music we made, it's just what we did, you know? It was fun. It wasn't hard. The music we made was often dictated by our own limitations. Like I said, I knew when it had to end—I felt it—but it was still really painful. It's a huge chunk of your life. You have to figure out how to exist outside of that. You wonder how you're gonna do this with other people.

So what was the process of finding new creative collaborators like?

It really was like speed dating. I went to LA, which I hate, and you know it's all riding around Topanga Canyon in convertibles and meeting with all of these LA lizard people. I just felt so alien there. The label would help set up all these sessions with different people and it really would feel just like a date. Sometimes you'd be like "Oh great relationship, what a great time! We made horrible songs." Or right away you'd be like, "It's just not a match." Or you would write a pretty great song but I'd be counting down the hours like I was working at fucking A&W Hot Dogs again. You know? You would seriously be looking at the clock and be like, "Is 6:30 here yet?" And then you would remember, "I'm not fucking married to this person I can leave whenever I want!" All of a sudden you felt like you were in school. You'd have to remind yourself you're a grown person. My motto lately is 'no forced fun'. Don't go chasing the good time, let the good time come to you. Be the good time. When I was meeting people to work with, it was kind of like that. If it didn't feel right, it wasn't.

I mean, creative work is *still* work and I understand that, but it shouldn't feel like torture. It shouldn't be like the job that you fucking hated when you were a teenager. Yes, it's work but if I wanted to feel like I was in prison, I'd just go fucking work at a prison. Know what I mean? Eventually I did meet the right people—including Jennifer Decilveo, my producer and writing partner—but it was a real process. Very real.

What did you discover about yourself during this process of learning how to work with new people?

This might sound crazy, but I was surprised at how instrumental I was to the actual process. That is not a joke. After years of being in a feminist band, being a feminist *in* a feminist band, from a feminist queer-dyke scene listening to mostly feminist bands, for it to be this late in the game to be like "Oh actually I was a big deal. I'm actually a huge deal. I was really important." It's kind of shocking that I only just felt that way now.

The Gossip was a trio and I knew that I was a third of it and I knew that I did a lot of work for it. I did a lot of the talking and the press stuff was usually all me. I was always happy to do it and I thought it was kind of my job because I was the singer. What I didn't realize until now was how important I was to that band musically, how much my own taste and my input were important. Only recently was I like, "Oh actually I was really vital to that band." And it wasn't really an issue of giving anyone else too much credit, but mostly an issue of not giving myself enough. Isn't that wild? Even if no one likes my new record—and I hope they will—it was still worth making it if only because it was a way to recognize my own talent and feel my own worth. Even when you've spent almost twenty years screaming and yelling and trying to empower people, it's not always easy to do that in your own life.

So much of what people love about you is you. Your entire career is kind of predicated on this idea of being real, self-acceptance, and not giving a shit. Have you had to push back against people trying to make you change?

Honestly, I've only really experienced that with this record, people trying to be a little too hands-on. It's not severe, but I do feel it sometimes. It's usually if I'm working with a new group of people and I might have to be like, "No, you don't have to do that," or "I don't do that." I've been doing this stuff for over 15 years now, since I was 18 years old. That's my entire adulthood spent reminding myself and other people, "I can do this."

It's also different when it's no longer a band, when it's just you. When it's just your name there people start to treat you differently, they want to treat you like a pop star or something. It's so so weird. I can be like, "You know what? Chill out everybody. It's all right."

People are so afraid to make a mistake. So afraid of it. I get that people want to do everything right, but you've got to be willing to take chances. Everyone makes mistakes. Entire albums are mistakes sometimes. Sometimes you have to make that mistake in order to get to the next thing. It's not the end of the world. And you can't be everybody's favorite band, you can't be everybody's best friend. You just can't, you know? You just you can't win all the time. I love my record and I hope other people do too, but I figure that no matter what I make there are always gonna be some weirdos who are gonna like it. I also don't worry too much about what other people think about it. At the end of the day how other people feel about it is really none of my business.

You've always been closely aligned and very vocal about issues related to feminism, queer rights, and body positivity. I wonder how that weighs on your creative process. Is there the expectation that you should always be talking about those things? Or that your work also has to always be addressing these issues somehow? The weight of representation can make things really complicated for queer artists.

I don't mind. You know, it's really easy and fun to talk about those things and for the most part I like talking about it. I wish there was more conversation about it with other people, instead of just me talking about it all the time, but I don't mind. It's hard when you are doing a 30 minute interview and suddenly you're being asked to explain these huge issues. Sometimes I just wanna be like, "I don't have enough time to explain to you how I feel about this, but these are my talking points." I really don't mind. As for my creative work, I don't think you should force your music to be about anything, but the things you care about as a human being will hopefully just naturally reflect in what you make. That should just happen.

To me, it's just life. It's who I am. I don't feel like I'm carrying a torch or anything. I do feel like it's my duty as a feminist and a queer because of the scene I came from. I feel like it's only paying it forward. So much of this discourse wasn't happening when I was 18. There was no fat positivity scene. No one was talking about body positivity in that way. It felt brand new. It was very punk rock.

Also, talking about this stuff, being able to represent for people, gives me a sense of purpose. I'm never gonna be one of those people that's like, "It's the music man. It's all about the music." Because I can't and because it's not. I don't take it that seriously, so there has to be something else giving me purpose. I don't think it's self-indulgent. I wanna be able to look back at all areas of my life and say, "I did my best." I like singing and making music and I'm happy to be doing it, but at the end of the day I don't care if Vogue fucking understands me. What I care about is that kid who comes up to me and says, "I was just like you."

Essential Beth Ditto:

"[Fire](#)" – From Beth Ditto's solo record, *Fake Sugar*

The Gossip – "[Listen Up](#)"

Beth Ditto – "[I wrote the book](#)"

The Gossip – "[Are you that somebody?](#)" (Live Aaliyah cover)

"[Supernature](#)" – CERRONE ft. Beth Ditto (Alan Braxe Mix)

Name

Beth Ditto

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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