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On embracing the power of your own identity

Musician Katherine Paul—also known as Black Belt Eagle Scout—discusses the importance of making music on her own terms, and why fully embracing your own identity can be a powerful creative force.

Did you grow up playing music?

I did. I'm from a place just north of Seattle near the San Juan Islands. It's a Swinomish Indian tribal community, which is a small Indian reservation. I grew up there and I went to school there. It's a really small town, but my school had a concert band and a jazz band. I played flute in the concert band, but my first instrument was really the piano. I wasn't a player in the Native American music at the powwows or anything. I was a dancer, so I danced, and then when I was older, I picked up guitar and drums on my own and started playing rock-and-roll type music. Eventually I started playing in bands. Music has been a part of my life as far as I can remember, even just being around it, and then when I started playing piano I was in the third grade. It has always been a big thing for me.

Did you write songs even from a young age?

I would hum and make up stuff, but I feel like I didn't really make songs until I was older, in high school. I remember just being confused, like, "What is a song? What should a song be? Is this a song that I'm doing?" I remember being unsure of myself in terms of music, but I think that's okay because teenagers are so self-conscious and unsure of themselves in general.

I know you played in a few different bands, but when did Black Belt Eagle Scout come into focus?

I moved to Portland to attend college and I played in a bunch of bands. I've been in Portland for a little over 10 years now, but this project didn't really start until maybe four years ago. At some point I just started playing my own songs again. I was in a band where I was the songwriter, but then that band stopped being a band, and then I was in a band where I was a drummer, and in that band I just really missed songwriting and playing guitar and doing my own thing. I would occasionally play or figure out songs just for fun. Eventually that is how Black Belt Eagle Scout started. I missed having a clear outlet to express myself. I missed having my own music and I missed being the person who created all of it and had that feeling of a creative process that was totally mine, that made me feel good.

You play every instrument on your record. Was that out of necessity, or did it just feel important that everything was coming from you?

It definitely felt important. That was my goal. I liked the challenge of writing and performing a record and doing every bit of it by myself. I know how to play the drums and guitar and piano, and I could kind of figure out how to play the bass, so I figured that I could figure out how to play whatever other instruments I might need to make a pretty basic rock album. That was my challenge, but I also just knew that it was something I wanted to do for myself. Not necessarily to prove anything to anyone, but just that I wanted to do it for me. Like, here is something that I created. I did it without any help, except for the engineer who was there to press record and help set up the microphones around the instruments.

When you're doing everything yourself, where do you start? Do you record the guitar parts first and then flesh everything else out around it?

First I like to do the guitar part, just because I feel like the guitar parts in most of my songs provide the foundation of the song. Then I'd go back and record the drums, and then figure out what other instruments were needed to fill out the song. It's pretty exhausting being the only person in the studio, especially when it came to the arrangements. It made me miss being in a band with other people, because at least then you could be like, "What do you think? What should go here? Does this sound OK?" Whereas if you're just by yourself, you're like, "What do I think?" That was definitely hard because we had to do things quickly and it was easy to lose perspective and get lost in it.

I recorded where I'm from, near Anacortes, Washington. It's about a 15-minute drive from the reservation that I grew up on, and they have this really awesome recording studio there for folks who are a part of that music scene. It's called the Anacortes Unknown Recording Studio. I've always wanted to record there

because it sounds amazing. So I booked time there, and then I decided to stay with my parents because they still lived up in Swinomish.

My mom is really awesome, and she packed me snacks and lunches to take with me each day when I went to the studio, which itself is in this old church that is also a community space. It's really big. You feel like you are walking into this old church, except all the pews are gone and it's just this big empty space. It's beautiful. I would record for long hours and then go home and crash in my parent's living room. It was hard, both physically and mentally. I was totally drained by the time it was done.

These songs speak so profoundly and directly to your history and your personal identity. Did that also make it a heavier process? Or were these easy songs to make?

They weren't really that easy. They were difficult. I remember sometimes laying on the floor of the studio and trying to figure out what to do next, or often just needing a break because sometimes when you're singing about really intense stuff and you're trying to sing in a really emotional way and to have a good take, it can get to you. It can make you sad. It can make you cry. It can make you feel overwhelmed. I definitely had some times like that where, after doing a take, I just needed to stop and go for a walk. Most of the songs were written in my bedroom.

I had just moved out of this place, this duplex in Portland, where I had lived for five years. That was the longest time I'd ever lived anywhere besides my parents' house. So I moved out, and it's really hard to find a place to live in Portland if you don't have super-duper friend hook-ups, which meant I ended up moving in with people I didn't know. It was pretty lonely at the time. I felt like I didn't have a foundation anymore. I would hole up in my bedroom late at night and just play guitar and write. The way that I write is by looping a lot of things. I got a Boss Loop Station, and then I played guitar and looped vocals on top of it. Even if the songs change a lot later on, most of them have that same kind of structure—loops and repetition.

You are very up front about identifying as an indigenous queer musician. How important was it for that to be reflected specifically in these songs? Or is that something that just kind of happens naturally when you write something?

Well, I definitely feel like it's an identity project, so I feel like I'm always going to write about things that pertain to my identity. Part of the reason why I do this is because I want other people like me to be able to feel like they can do it, too. I feel like as someone who's queer and who grew up on an Indian reservation, my experience can speak to certain people. I didn't come out to my parents until I was in college, mostly because I didn't feel like I could. I felt like I wouldn't be accepted. There are lots of young people out there going through those exact same experiences. I'm trying to communicate with them. That's why I'm so up front about it.

I want people who might be grappling with their own identity—whatever it happens to be—to feel like they can exist and they can thrive. I want to be there for people to see, "Okay. There's a person doing this music. They have this identity. They're accepted by certain people. I can feel accepted, too." That's why I do music, because I love it, but I also do it because I know who I am and how important my identity could be for someone else to see.

Even in 2018, the milieu of what we call "indie rock" is still overwhelmingly white and male and heterosexual. To see a Native American person who is also a queer woman making music in these spaces feels radical and important.

Yeah, I realized that pretty early on. You know, I just am who I am—a person playing music. But I also understand it's a political thing, that the personal really is political. There needs to be more voices in music—more women, differing identities, more non-binary people, more indigenous people, more brown people, more people speaking to and about the variety of queer identities. Identity is powerful. We need those voices to be heard, and I'm all about that. I'm a huge supporter of that, and I understand that what I'm doing is radical in a way.

It's interesting to be in front of different kinds of audiences. Recently, we played a show, and a bunch of my indigenous Native artist friends came. It's so interesting talking to them and having them in the audience, sharing stories and hanging out, versus all of the other shows we've played so far, which have been to mostly white audiences. At every show we play, before we play the song "Indians Never Die," I always say something about what it means and sometimes it's hard for me to talk about it. The song is about how the customs of indigenous people will never die, we will always protect them and the places where we are from. That is the basis of who we are. We are the people that lived first in this land and love this land and developed deep spiritual connections with this land. When I talk about this in front of an audience, I always kind of recognize who is in the crowd and how the audience responds. Some audiences are really into it, and they'll applaud after I talk about it. Some audiences are totally quiet and you wonder why. When I had all of my indigenous friends in the audience, I got all of these loud Native calls and stuff like that. It's definitely an interesting thing, touring and playing.

Being able to represent for queer people and indigenous people is, of course, a beautiful thing. I would imagine, though, that it can also sometimes be a heavy responsibility, as if you're speaking on behalf of these entire demographics of marginalized people. Even as a gay writer, I sometimes fear saying the wrong thing, as if I'm misspeaking on behalf of all gay people.

Yeah. I feel like I'm still working through that. I definitely know what you mean. So far, I haven't had

any really negative things come up. Sometimes I do get scared because of my identity. You know, I am traveling through the United States playing shows and there are a lot of really terrible people out there that want to kill minorities and queer people, so as a queer person and a Native American, I am totally aware that I could be putting myself in danger by being so open about who I am, both in my art and in my day-to-day life. There is a danger that is always looming.

I also don't want to be the person who tries to speak for everybody. No one can do that. However, I do want to be a voice out there that helps elevate other voices, especially when talking about Native voices. There are tons of tribes. Every tribe is different in that they have their customs and specific traditions. We are all quite different, but you still get lumped into this large category of just being Native American. I like to remind people that, for example, where I'm from our traditions are very different from the traditions of the tribes that live just a couple of hours south of us. I feel like not a lot of Americans see or understand that. I feel like that's something important to share. Native Americans in this country are still a wildly misunderstood people.

So, I don't know. We'll see how it goes. I'm still figuring it all out. The thing that you said about not wanting to say the wrong thing, I think about that a lot. I'm always like, "I hope I don't offend anybody or say the wrong thing," but I feel like my intentions are good, and I hope people will see that. And if I make a mistake or something, all I can do is be honest and try my best. That's all anyone can do, really.

Katherine Paul recommends:

One thing I would recommend is good communication. Try as hard as you can to be a good communicator, because that's always helpful. So many unnecessary problems in life can be avoided by simply communicating clearly and honestly.

The second thing I would recommend is self-care, even if you're stressed out and you don't have time. Just fucking make the time. Do it. It'll make you feel better, even if it's just some small little thing you do for yourself.

The third thing I recommend is having a good night with your friends, hanging out with your buds, going and doing dumb things with people you like. It's a good thing to do. That's what I love to do when I'm at home. It's important. Make time for it. It's more therapeutic than you even realize.

I'd love to recommend my friend Haley Heynderickx. She has this album out recently and it's amazing. I'd highly recommend listening to that. And then I'd also recommend my other friend, Fabi Reyna. She is in this band called Sávila, and they just put out a record that is so good. I would recommend listening to these two records, maybe when you're in the bath or something, doing your self-care.

Name

Katherine Paul

Vocation

Musician

Fact



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