Cecile Schott on being self-sufficient and the benefits of bird watching

December 21, 2017 -

As told to Nick Yulman, 3650 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Anxiety.

With each album you've reinvented your sound, using different instruments and techniques. Is finding a fresh sonic palette an important part of starting a new project for you?

I don't think it is as intentional as me thinking, "How can I surprise myself? How can I surprise my listeners?" It's more following my own desires and what feels right. My interests and little things in life take me towards a certain type of instrument. Because I listen to a ton of music, I'm in love with many different instruments. That's why when I finish with one thing, I can always think of something else that I'm interested in.

The most striking example in my discography is the viola da gamba. I saw a film when I was 15, which was very popular in France, *Tous les Matins du Monde*. It's about two Baroque French composers, Marin Marais and Sainte-Colombe. That's how I got introduced to the sound of the viola da gamba and I fell in love with it. My parents wouldn't have been able to afford the instrument and there would have been no teacher in my small provincial town. It just lay there as something really beautiful but out of reach.

Then time passed. I had my own funds because I taught English, and I bought myself a cello, which was my introduction to bowed instruments. It was just a small step to thinking, "What's preventing me from getting a viola made and doing my own music with it?" Often we're the ones limiting ourselves through fear of failure or fear that we're not going to fit other people's expectations. But that's in our heads.

Each one of us is very small in this world. My view on making music is that, on the one hand, it's not important in the grand scheme of things. But because it's not important, you should not compromise. Ultimately no one's going to care in a negative way and there will be people who connect with the music. I just do what I want to do now.

Once you had the viola made and finally had it in your hands, how long did it take before you were making something with it that felt like your art?

I got the viola in January 2006. It takes nine months for it to be made so it's kind of a nice metaphor. I immediately took lessons with a really good instructor who's very open-minded. I told her I didn't have any classical background and it didn't bother her. After three or four months, I was already starting to write stuff. I realized that taking lessons in Baroque music was possibly hindering me from developing my own thing. It's a time struggle between studying something in the classical way and trying to develop your own language.

This Place In Time by Colleen. Photographer: Pascal Vermeulen.

Is making work while you're learning something new an approach that you actively seek out?

With recording, I've learned a lot over the years and it's been completely hands-on. As I'm learning, it's always been risky and difficult but it's part of the process. There have been moments where I've thought, "You're completely crazy. You're just not up to the task," but then there's always something in me that's very stubborn. I prefer to do

things by myself even if it’s very slow-moving and full of pitfalls rather than just hand it over to someone else. When you finally manage to get to where you want to be, it gives you this sense of deep satisfaction.

What is your composition process like?

I’m very selective with what I do so, if there are eight songs on an album, it probably means that I’ve made about 50 different song… I like to call them “kernels.” It starts with just playing. Grab your instrument, put your fingers somewhere, and if you do that many times, at one point there’ll be something that grabs your attention. If anything sounds good I record it.

Then the day after, I go back and listen. Some of them deserve to be born and others should just be left on the side. If I’m not excited about something, insist a little bit but don’t push it too much. You have to listen to what is sounding right to you.

Letting go of ideas that you liked can be hard though. Has it gotten easier over time?

Yeah, because what can you do? The first metaphor that comes to me would be maybe you fancy someone but they don’t fancy you. It’s the reality of it so you need to move on. Ultimately, it’s fascinating how many avenues there are to explore.

10 years ago I had to stop making music for a little while because I was feeling burned out and at the time I really doubted whether I would ever make music again. Right now I’m tired and I think I may need another break but my feeling is completely different. I have a lot more trust that there are way more things for me to do afterwards.

Can you say more about that decision to take a break from music and how you handled it?

I just burned out. I went to play in Brazil in 2009 and it should have been really exciting, but I went there, fell ill because the weather was terrible, and I played these three concerts. As I went onstage, I really felt like my heart wasn’t in it. I had made a promise to myself that music would never be something I would do just because it’s a job. When you perform on your own, there is no way you’re going to be onstage and be happy and comfortable if you don’t believe 100% in what you’re doing, because there’s no one out there to back you.

I only stopped making music for about a year and did feel guilty about it. I didn’t even feel like listening to music. But I started to take ceramics lessons because I’d fallen in love with Japanese ceramics. I also took stone-carving lessons. It had an impact on how I viewed my creative process. My stone-carving teacher was this woman who would be in her garden, even if it was winter, from eight in the morning until seven in the evening, stone-carving by hand.

It just struck me as something very pure—almost a symbol of the creative act. You have a rough stone and you chip away until you have what you want. I thought, “What’s wrong is not my music-making. It’s all the stuff that’s around it. I need to try and get rid of as many things as possible in my life that are preventing me from going to that creative bit.” Right after that, I decided to move to Spain. That was the first step towards finding another way of living. Something much more calm. I love where I live for the beautiful, natural environment. There’s almost nothing there that interests me culturally. You could say that’s a disaster, but for me it’s turned out to be the opposite. I don’t need to go to any exhibition or concert. I can just do my thing in my studio.

Another thing that helped me to go back to creation—I was forced to rent a space because my partner, Iker Spozio—he’s a painter and makes all the artwork for my records—he works from home and there’s not space for us both. So I’ve had this studio where no internet connection means no temptation to do any admin, any email. The only thing I can do is be creative. That’s how this creative block ended.

Iker’s dad, who was a painter himself, always tells him, “There’s no such thing as inspiration. There’s only work.” There’s also a quote by Brâncuși that I really love: “Things are not difficult to make; what is difficult is putting ourselves in the state of mind to make them.”

The album that came after this break from making music, *The Weighing of the Heart*, was the first one where you used your voice. Did the experience of stepping away lead to that?

When you take a break from what you do—especially if you’re put off by the very thing that you love—it’s a fresh, clean slate when you get back to it. For some reason I just felt that I wanted to sing. It’s hard to put it into words.

One of the things that helped me go back to making music was reading this incredible biography of Arthur Russell, *Hold On to Your Dreams*, by Tim Lawrence. I thought, “This is the kind of musician that I want to be.” He wasn’t concerned with genre. He was able to sing, do instrumentals, do electronic stuff—even very danceable stuff, poppier stuff, or more experimental stuff. I’m not much of a hero worshiper, but he’s my musical hero if I had to pick one.

I thought, “Arthur Russell sang and you feel like singing, why not try it?” It wasn’t easy. I didn’t take any singing lessons, so I did things wrong for about a year. And then I just looked for singing tutorials on the Internet, which was hilarious because actually I ended up following the advice of this guy who does soul and R&B lessons. It taught me how to get my voice out. That was powerful for me. The voice is something that is so personal to every one of us that if you manage to break the barrier of letting your voice out, it’s important from a confidence point of view.

Ursa Major Find by Colleen. Photographer: Far Out and Beyond.

You recently wrote a series of Facebook posts about deciding to make your own clothes. How do these other creative projects like ceramics, stone carving, or sewing contribute to making music?

Honestly I can't say that making my own clothes influences my music-making. But one of the best things about being a human is that we have this ability, which distinguishes us from other animals, to take something, a raw material and shape that into whatever we want. Fabric, stone, clay, or notes and vibrations in the air — which is what music is. The fascinating thing is that each one of us will do something different.

It's part of a DIY/making ethos where you realize that you are able to learn whatever you want. You just need time, which is of course the real luxury — more important than money. It's interesting to find a balance where you can use your time as creatively as possible and just learn to make stuff. It makes you more critical of the other things that are being offered to you.

I was fed up with not finding the clothes that I wanted. Whenever I saw something that I really liked, it was horribly expensive. Because a lot of the clothes I like are very minimal, I thought, "How hard can it be to make?" You just fall in love with the idea of doing what you really want. It's made to measure so you learn how to adapt patterns to your body. It's a cool thing to have in your life. Somehow it feels different to wear your own clothes.

Then there's the ethical aspect. Cheap fashion has a horrible cost on the environment and people. Each time we make a decision to improve our own patterns of consumption, it's like a drop in the ocean, but I'd rather have my drop in the ocean than nothing at all.

You're also making clothes for your performances. Did you think of that holistically, almost like designing costumes for an opera?

Yeah, it's a little bit like that. For instance, there's an amazing painter, Naomi Ito, and she has this fabric brand called Nani IRO. She has this incredible blue mountain fabric. The color, the hills, it just fits into the album. And this jacket that I'm wearing, these little dots somehow make me think of stars. There are references to the stars in the album. I'm not obsessed with having a whole unity, but it is nice to have the clothes be a replica of the feelings that I want to put forward with the album.

When we sat down to talk, you looked out the window and mentioned that you're into birdwatching. Can you talk a little bit about what lead you to that and how it intertwines with your creative practice?

The creative process doesn't exist in a void. Anything you put in your life, whether negative or positive will somehow contribute to making you more relaxed and prone to creating, or the reverse—make you stressed out. Birdwatching is this wonderful little window of time that I can give to myself.

Often we think we're aware of our surroundings and actually we're not. I was convinced that where I lived, we had maybe five or six different kinds of birds and then, as I learned to watch, I realized that there were so many more bird species. I just hadn't been paying attention. That was an interesting life lesson that could be applied to making — sometimes we become used to our tools and we don't realize that we can explore them so much more.

There are many other species of sound you can get out of these instruments? Something like that?

Yeah. It gets me out of my own mind and my own ego. We live inside our heads, and our emails, and the things that are written about our work. If you have something like birdwatching in your life, at least you're guaranteed that in those moments you forget about yourself and it's just about how other creatures are living their own important lives. It's a very healthy thing for me physically and psychically.

How do thoughts like this or other life experiences find their way into your lyrics?

I started composing my new album in November 2015 just as I was coming back from visiting someone in my family who suddenly fell very ill. They live in my hometown which is a small provincial town. To go there you need to go through Paris. On my way back I needed to drop my viola bow at a luthier for repair and it happened to be Friday the 13th of November, 2015. The luthier was two streets away from the cafes where the attacks happened that day. I was there at five in the afternoon, so I went past those terraces. I went to my friend's house, we had dinner and my boyfriend was actually the one who called us from Spain to say, "Hey, this is happening right now." We spent the entire evening following what was happening. You could hear sirens. Thankfully, I wasn't involved in any of it. I didn't see anything. I haven't lost anyone, but it was just a weird

coincidence that I had to spend 24 hours in Paris and I'm never there.

When I came back home the day afterwards, it was very shocking. After about two weeks I thought "I have this album that I need to work on so I have to go back in the studio because being here, on the sofa, following the news is not going to improve any of this."

The album follows a narrative arc. It starts with a song called "November" which I thought encapsulated the sadness of that month for me. Then it moves on and "Summer Night (Bat Song)" is about the next summer, 2016. I was at my parents' and I had my windows open all day. It was a beautiful summer and I would watch the birds in the afternoon and wait for the first bats to appear. It's really magical, the moment when it's starting to get dark.

One evening there was this bat hunting in the garden and all of a sudden it flew in my direction. I had my windows wide open and it turned at the last microsecond. I thought it was a beautiful metaphor. I wish that my thoughts could be as controlled as the bat's flight. When thoughts start going in the wrong direction, I wish I had the ability to stop and just go back to a more normal mode of thinking.

I think that's a good example of how real life and doing something creative can interact. I knew, "This moment is something important." This is a weird period where someone in my family is very ill but this beautiful thing is happening outside — this nature that surrounds us and these creatures living their own lives. I knew I wanted to incorporate that into the song because I felt such a strong sense of peace that night.

Summer Night (Bat Song) by Colleen. Photographer: John Muse.

Was starting to work on this album during a dark time in your life something that you embraced? Did it feel natural to channel those emotions into creating or was hard to find motivation?

At first it did feel very strange and almost out of place to go back to making music. But then very quickly it felt really therapeutic, especially because the music that I made was able to compensate for the darkness that I was feeling. For instance, the first section of my song "Another World," is very joyful and propulsive, and that was in direct contrast to this feeling of gloomy stillness.

The first moments of making the new songs was counterbalancing the reality. And then the person in my family thankfully got better, and little by little, it's not like you forget about what's happened but it just becomes something of the past. That's when I was able to write things that sounded a little bit darker and I was able to keep going with the lyrics.

The lyric writing wasn't easy because I wanted to express things about life and death and of course that's very tricky. You can easily fall into cliches. Which is why actually I go more for poetic writing — to capture some of that ebb and flow of contradictory emotions.

As you mentioned, you live with your partner, Iker Spozio, who creates your album covers. How has it been having two creative practices under one roof?

It's been very invigorating. He's the kind of person who's so passionate that it's essential for him to paint every day. I'm actually much lazier and also I unfortunately have more admin stuff to do. But If you're feeling lazy and you look and there's someone in the creative process, it makes you feel bad — that pushes me to go to the studio and be creative myself.

We've evolved in similar ways. Iker has been going towards color and abstraction and that's also what I've been doing in my work, especially the last record. Going into

electronic sound, it’s something that I wasn’t expecting, but I’ve really enjoyed it for the pure, almost abstract sonic quality. When I see him trying out ideas in sketches for his geometrical work and then working on the superimposition of colors, you could relate that to the different layers that go into sound production.

Then when I have a new album out, I can count on him, making a cover that will just look amazing. Somehow it becomes a visual equivalent to what I’ve been trying to do, so I’m very lucky.

Iker Spozio’s cover art for A Flame My Love, a Frequency.

Is there something that you wish somebody had told you when you were first starting out?

You can’t let your judgment of what you do be influenced by other people. Even as a 41 year old musician with my sixth album—I’ve got a record contract and a very supportive label behind me—you are the one who needs to be satisfied. There is space for everyone’s creative vision in this world. I don’t think you should curb or modify your desires to suit anyone.

That’s on the creative side. On the professional side, think carefully about who you surround yourself with and keep learning. Don’t sign a contract without understanding it. Don’t give away your publishing rights—or if you do, make sure that the people you are giving them to are going to give you more publishing work.

I’ve seen younger musicians who think having a manager or having a bunch of people working for you is a sign of being important. It’s probably more doable to be a full-time musician if you take a lot of things into your own hands. Yes, it will mean getting down to the nitty-gritty part of things. You will have to learn, but ultimately you’ll be responsible for how your music is presented, and you run less risk of falling into the wrong hands. That can really end careers. It can kill the creative spark. Try to stay self-sufficient because that’s the best way of retaining your creative independence.

Cecile Schott recommends:

My favourite sculptors: Constantin Brâncuși and Barbara Hepworth

Tim Lawrence's Arthur Russell biography, *Hold On to Your Dreams*

Mixes I made of my favorite Jamaican music:
On *FACT*
On Soundcloud
Birdwatching: widening your capacities for observation through truly paying attention to what surrounds you and just soaking up the beauty of the amazing creatures that live alongside us.

Name
Cecile Schott

Vocation
Musician

Photo credit: Isabel Dublang