

Emily Haines on commitment



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1755 words.

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

You have a variety of creative pursuits, whether it be your work in Metric, as a solo artist, or outside collaborations. Does your songwriting practice differ depending on the circumstances or which project you're focused on?

It's more like the first five steps are the same and then the paths diverge. I always kind of go to the same sort of solitary place where songs hide, regardless of where they're headed, and then as the ideas form, it becomes clear what they're suited to. It's kind of this sense I've had my whole life, that I'm being led around on a leash by a song. I'm in control of the writing in some respects, but it goes where it wants to go. I try to approach it without being too precious. I like the idea that there is some sort of value in everything I write, but in order for me to release it, it means that I deemed it valuable for other people. That's kind of the task the material needs to work. Wallowing in my own feelings is not really an option, the song needs to feel as if it can be of service to other people.

Do music and lyrics typically evolve on a parallel path? Are there pieces of music that just never find words? Or words that you've carried around that are looking for the right song to land in?

It's kind of a running joke in the band that I always have an unused chorus or a rogue verse in my pocket. I have a stash-kind of like organs ready for transplant—of abandoned verses, choruses, pre-choruses, and bridges. Sometimes, particularly with Metric, there will be a time where it's all there except for this one thing. What is it? Then luckily I'll have this fully intact section of music that's just kind of floating in space that I can grab. That happens a lot.

For the most part, with stuff that ends up being on my own records, like with *Choir of The Mind* and *Knives Don't Have Your Back*, those are generally pieces that are connected to sitting at the piano and everything happening at once. Then the process is like a refinement that happens generally without stopping. It's all at once. The song presents itself and then I have to glean it. It feels a bit like when you do a rubbing with a piece of paper and a pencil. Say there is a nickel underneath the paper and you're rubbing the pencil over it to try and get an impression of the image. The creative process very much feels like that—you are always trying to see what is underneath, there is this thing that is always trying to reveal itself to you.

You've been playing piano since you were young. How formative has that particular instrument been in the way you think about songs and writing and music?

It's funny, as we get older and start doing things like going to therapy, you start to really appreciate certain things. One of the things that I've been looking at is how truly pivotal that moment was, back when I was five or six, and was first introduced to the piano. First of all, I saw at a young age how playing the piano could get me out of doing all kinds of other things. The dishes, homework, anything. Eventually writing my own stuff became a way to create my own reality. Sometimes I'm quite surprised when looking back at the professional accomplishments of Metric because in a lot of ways that's what we were doing. We wrote our own reality, and in the process somehow managed to create something concrete that also serves an audience and employs people and is actually functional.

I love the idea of creating your own reality and the notion of figuring things out by doing them.

For sure. It's a long, lifetime continuation of figuring things out by doing them. I feel like every time I sit at the piano or get up on stage with Metric or do any part of this work, it's connected to the very first thing I ever did. There are fragments of things that I've been carrying around for years that have finally ended up on *Choir of The Mind*, little passages that I carried around forever that eventually found their place. It's the same thing with narrative writing. You just have to sit in the chair and most of the job is letting it come. You write your way through it. You figure it out while you do it.

Are you someone who writes all the time? Can you work anywhere?

Yeah. I find that it needs to be the most mundane circumstances, a very non-pressure situation. Writing is not a scented candle atmospheric thing. I feel like I actually have to ward off any preciousness around the process, particularly if I'm writing at the piano. It's risky because the instrument itself leans toward a certain stylistic vibe and a certain mood. I prefer to be kind of punk rock about it. A cold bare light bulb is preferable and a little bit of discomfort helps. I don't need a soft place.

Your dad was a poet. How did that affect how you think about what you do?

It's interesting. You know, my father was very unsatisfied with his professional life. I thought the most punk rock thing I could do was to be involved with pop music because everything that I grew up with, everything in his realm, was really avant-jazz stuff. It kind of felt like his whole life he was writing stuff that was really challenging and then being mystified and insulted when the whole world didn't get it. And yet refusing in any way to concede anything to anyone. Ever.

He was an incredible role model because he was a teacher by trade. I was also inspired by the life that my parents made—living in India and then coming to Canada in the 70's and being American ex-patriots and having this whole life they created. That made a huge impression on me. His style of writing remains unlike anything I've ever encountered and I respect how committed he was to doing his own thing. I think it was because he was just so stubborn and he was, you know, like a football player from Ducker, Michigan. It was incredible to me that he was able to discover this side of himself and develop it. He also instilled in me this intense respect for musicians and writers. Still, I think a lot about his life, and that he was really frustrated, and I remember him getting royalty checks that were like 75 cents. It kind of dispelled a lot of illusions I might have about a life in the arts. Also, I guess poetry is not such a lucrative gig.

How do you avoid burning out?

Honestly, the only time that I feel things start to spin out is when I buy into the whole "work really hard and then just don't work at all" idea. It's the retirement model. It's the "I'm trying to do as little work as possible model," which is unfortunately what happens to a lot of touring musicians. You come off the intensity of being road and then you want to just be the king of pina colodas on the beach for the three months. For me, the only time when I actually feel like my creative drive starts to wane is if I fall for that bullshit. I only burn out when people try to convince me that somehow this is a job that I don't want.

The whole point of being an artist is that it can provide a fluid life. God knows that running the company, all the business stuff of being in a band, there's a certain amount of admin and email that could grate on anyone. I just feel like the more I go in—the more I commit to the work, the more energy I have. It's like any kind of exercise right? The harder you work at it, the more you get back, but if you start to look for ways to get out of it, ways to cut corners, the less successful it is. It just becomes sad.

As a person who has been making records and touring for a long time, what advice do you have for young musicians?

It's an odd time right now. I've been thinking about the genre of music that I make and how it's not a sonically defined genre, at least in my mind. With all of our categories and ways, comparing things and everyone's opinions and like micro-sub-tribalisms around, you know, snare tones and synth sounds or whatever, it's all become so strange. The defining element—why I would say that what I do is rock-n-roll—has to do with the principles by which you live and do your work. You live it. You force yourself into this lived experience, you commit to it fully, and you craft that into work that you can go out and play for everyone. You record it and you play it for everyone. The end. Unfortunately, that's kind of a dying art right?

A lot of these young people I meet don't have that same model in mind, or they've never experienced that side of things. I guess all I would say to them is, "What kind of life do you want?" Because this is the one I want. If you want the commitment to experience, and the whole point is to have this kind of crazy amazing life, then throw yourself into it completely. Play shows. Write songs. Work hard. Commit fully to whatever it is. If that's not what you want, if instead you're looking to just YouTube-Star this whole thing, then I really don't have any advice for you other than have a good time, you know? And save your money. You might end up working at Starbucks instead.

Emily Haines recommends:

Charles Bukowski - [Post Office](#)

Paul Haines - [Secret Carnival Workers: The Paul Haines Reader](#)

"Savitri" the Indian epic poem by [Sri Aurobindo](#)

[Democracy Now](#) podcast

Name

Emily Haines

Vocation

Musician



