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As told to Hether Fortune, 3247 words.

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# On figuring out how to do whatever you want

Musician and filmmaker Hannah Lew reflects on how her approach to making music has changed over time, the creative problem-solving involved in being an artist, and why motherhood is both amazing and also not that big of a deal.

**You're best known for your work as a filmmaker and with music. Which did you start doing first?**

I started doing music first. Actually, what I first started doing was visual art. I thought that's what I wanted to do for most of my life. Then, when I was in my early 20s, I had a pretty abrupt change of course during 9/11. I lived in New York and I was like, "What is this art world?" There were all these millionaires buying things and it didn't seem like the art could belong to people unless they had this vast understanding and vocabulary about fine art. I wanted to do something that was accessible, that everyone could have.

So at that point I became interested in making music, because I felt like film and music are mediums that anyone can understand and tap into. Sure, there's subtext and language in both that some people might be more privy to, but you can still enjoy something. I had made some little Super-8 movie experiments before I really dove into making music, but that didn't pick up until I started making music videos for my old band, Glass Widow. And then for other people, including you.

**True! I loved my experiences working with you. I think it's because you have a strong DIY work ethic. It's always seemed like you can do anything, and if you can't, you just figure out how. I'm curious about where that came from. How did you know that you could just start making art in all of these different mediums?**

Well, the first band that I ever played in, when I was like 19, was with my friend Dustin, and he had been in other bands. I was like, "You can just do it yourself?" He was like, "Yeah, you make money so when you're on tour you can pay for gas." He kind of laid it all out. I was like, "Oh, ok." The further you go into a project, the more you learn about business to a certain extent, and you see how you could make it sustainable. But also, I've never really waited for validation from other people to do my thing. I think that's a big part of it. I've always been a person that's like, "If I don't know how to do it, I can figure out how to do it."

I was always putting together the Ikea furniture as a child when my parents couldn't figure it out. I'm not afraid to try new things. I think when I first started doing Cold Beat I may have wanted more validation, more coddling, because it was the first time I'd been the only singer in a band and I was nervous about it. At this point I don't have that kind of confidence issue. I'm just making what I like. I believe in what I like. I know that if I like it, I'm happy to put it out and it doesn't matter if 10 people respond or 100 people or 1,000 people.

**Cold Beat started primarily as a solo project for you, but now it's evolved to be more collaborative, whereas Grass Widow was always totally collaborative. It was very much like a melding of ideas, of three very different voices and personalities. How does collaborating with people affect your creative process?**

I think with Grass Widow, it was so open that the relationships brought out the best and the worst in me. It was just so intense that it cost me sometimes, but it was also nurturing and amazing to be like, "Here's this great idea I would have never thought of, but this other person thought of it." I never had total ownership in a way that felt like it was fully reflective of me because it wasn't all me, or Raven

or Lily. It was this fourth entity that we made together.

So it was really interesting and I'm glad I had the energy for it when I was young. I don't think I'd be able to do it now. With Cold Beat I've spent years experimenting with different ways of doing things. We haven't had a drummer for several years now, and I've just been making all the beats on the computer. I make the basic tracks, then I bring them to the band and everyone brings something to the table. But everyone who's playing in the band right now are people I trust so much that the process is really easy. Whatever they contribute is always something that I think is a really good idea, and it's making this thing that I made even better. I have this complete trust that everyone's seeing the same picture, and coming from the same place.

While I was pregnant, we recorded a record. There was only one song that had been written before I was pregnant or before I knew I was pregnant. But the whole record was made while I was pregnant. First I was like, "I should try to finish these songs." Then I was like, "Oh, maybe I should just write a couple more songs." Now we have 10 songs, so it's a full album. And we actually sent in the very last song to get mixed like two days before I went into labor.

**What's your home recording process like?**

I work in Logic and it's really easy. I find that the program is good enough that I can use really simple tools and get my ideas across. And there's room to play. Usually what I'll do is I'll lay out drum machines and soft synths, and sometimes bass. I didn't play on bass on the last record we recorded mostly because I was so pregnant. I was like, "I don't want to hold a bass." So I ended up playing more keyboard, which is interesting because now I feel like I never want to hold a bass again. It hurts my back and I have to twist myself in a weird way.

Once I've tracked the synths and drum machines, everyone will come over. Kyle has a million crazy synthesizers and he'll try out different sounds and parts, as will Luciano. Sean will play guitar, and they will write parts with real instruments over what I've already done. I lay out the arrangement and the skeleton and then we build. But it's pretty easy! My setup is small—just some monitors, a laptop, and an interface. It's been really empowering to have a small setup and still be able to really get ideas out.

**You released an album with Eurythmics covers through Dark Entries last year. What was it like to record versions of other people's songs versus your own original ones?**

Do you ever get obsessed with an artist and it makes you think your own music sucks? And you're just like, "How can I write new music when *this* already exists?" That's kind of what happened to me with "In the Garden" by the Eurythmics. So I decided to record two or three covers just for fun. When I finished I was surprised by how much I liked them, which made me wonder if I should release them. I felt a little self-conscious about releasing an album of covers, so I sent them to Josh at Dark Entries, who I'd been in touch with already through ordering stuff for my record store, just to see how he would react. He loved it, and had serendipitously tried to get the Eurythmics to let him put out a B sides album, but they said no. So he was in a headspace to do a Eurythmics-related release. However, Dark Entries only releases 12-inches so I had to record more. I ended up recording eight songs, so a whole album of the Eurythmics covers. I was like, *what just happened?* It just snowballed. But it was so fun to go in and just interpret things. You have the confidence to start because someone else already wrote it, and you already love the song. And it's a good exercise to stretch yourself and use sounds you don't usually use. It expanded my palette so much. Annie Lennox's voice is so strong, but in the beginning it didn't have the same diva grit she became known for, and I really related to that earlier style of her singing. I needed that specific kind of female archetype at the time.

After that, writing my own stuff was really fluid. I was so greased up that it basically made writing originals easy. I think we all had so much fun doing it that it put us in a good place to be working on new stuff and feeling inspired.

**You have a record label, Crime On The Moon, as well as a new record store in Oakland. Do you think having the label sort of segued you into opening a record store?**

Definitely. I think just being at a merch table for so many years inspired me. Even my bandmate Kyle said to me, "It's like you're at a merch table every day now." And I'm like, "I know." Obviously it's not all my own stuff, but at least I have somewhere to sell off all my own records now too.

I think part of being a musician is being a little bit of a business person, unless you just have tons of money. Usually you just have to figure out how you're going to pay for it all. With Cold Beat, until I started recording things myself, when I went into a studio I was worrying about money the whole time. I was like, "Oh god, we have to hurry up and finish." I compromised so much sonically because of that. part of what is good about recording things myself at home is that I don't have to compromise because I'm not worried about time in the studio. That's a downside of putting things out yourself—you're like, "Okay, I budgeted for three days in the studio. And it's like \$500 a day." That is stressful. But if you have the ideas and the right chemistry, you can do a lot within any set of parameters or financial limitations, as long as you're in a situation where you can give yourself space to experiment. It's in the experimentation where we come up with our best stuff.

**There was a period of time when you were extremely prolific as a music video director. How did you balance that with working on your own projects? Did you have to slow down so you could focus more on music?**

Well the thing is, I get really ambitious. If I make something, I'm going to give it my all. I can't just half-ass it and make someone an okay video. That's another thing I'm glad that I did a lot of when I was younger—make videos. Because now the energy that I used to put toward making videos all the time, I've just been putting towards my own music. I'm trying to direct that ambition more towards stuff I'm doing.

I used to let myself go into a creative zone that involved a lot of not sleeping, kind of like an insane manic zone of working really hard and getting really passionate and planning a lot. Because you have to, to make it work. You have to plan a bunch and be really resourceful and call in a bunch of favors. I feel like during the time I was making videos, there was perpetually always someone a little bit mad at me. I was calling in favors to use locations constantly, because I never had any huge budget. I was usually working with a pretty small budget and not really getting paid at the end of the day because I was using all the money to make it awesome. Lately I've just been directing energy more towards Cold Beat and our stage design, but I did come out of the woodwork last year and make a Shannon Shaw video.

**Despite how far society has come in regards to feminism and being a working mother, there still seems to be this pervasive idea that a female artist will have to give up her career or creative work in order to have a family. You mentioned that you recently had your first child, and you also put out an album last year and have a new one in the works. What has your experience been as a working artist and mother so far?**

Yeah, that's something that I've always thought about. I know that women historically, and in other parts of the country and in other fields of work, have had babies younger than I did. I was never sure that I wanted to have kids. I think women used to have babies to give themselves some purpose. I'm a mother now, but I've always felt purpose with what I do. And I never felt that urge or push like, "Oh I need to do that so I'm Mrs. Somebody and I'm somebody's mother." I never felt that.

Then, last year, I had some health issues and my doctor advised me to get an egg count to see where I was at. So I did and she was like, "You have a very low chance of having kids." And I was like, "What? Someone's telling me I can't do something?" Then I went and got pregnant like three weeks later! All it took was someone telling me I couldn't do it and I was like, "I'll show them." I realized at that point that I actually really did want to do it. I thought a lot about the fact that I'm in a band with people that are already pretty mellow. We're not playing shows all the time. The nightlife part of music isn't as much in the forefront for us. Socializing in a bar all the time, we don't really do that. Of course, I spent over a decade or maybe two—yikes, definitely two—decades just touring constantly and playing every show we got. But as a band we're more focused on the creative part now. So I knew that I could do it and be supported. It feels like a really positive time to be making stuff. I'm realizing that I can do it all.

I don't think you're doing your kid a service by not doing what you love, because they won't know who you really are if you deny that part of yourself. I played four shows while I was pregnant, and it felt really great. I was like, "We're doing this, we're playing a show, this is what your mom does." I think every woman should try to find the space to do what they do *and* be a mom if that's something they want.

My son is only six weeks old and I've already figured out how to have a couple of short band practices. Even by just getting three hours to do something creative and engage with something that I work on in that way, it means I'm all the more present when I see him because I'm still doing my thing, I'm still nurturing that part of who I am.

I feel like people assume that once you're a mom, you're going to just be a mom. If anything it's expanded my love so much that even while I was pregnant, I felt really creative. Well, the first trimester I was really sick, and I couldn't make anything, and I was like, "How do people go to work and do this?" I just became a million times more of a feminist than I already was while I was pregnant. Every person walking down the street spent nine months inside of a woman. Be nice to women. Misogyny just makes zero sense anyway, but especially when you're pregnant you're just like—what the hell? We kept you alive.

But in terms of putting out a record, if someone were to put out my new record and they wanted me to tour a lot, I'd be like, "Okay, cool. But I need to bring a tour nanny." And I think about women who have brought babies on tour and stuff, and you have to have the infrastructure to do that. As Cold Beat does right now, I don't really even have the infrastructure to get my own hotel room. And that's a reality. I don't care about breastfeeding in front of my bandmates anywhere or whatever, but I'm not going to put them in a position where there's a screaming, crying baby all night, every night on tour. I know Sonic Youth toured with babies and all kinds of bands toured with babies, and I know people who have done it without the kind of infrastructure that bigger bands like that had, but I don't think I could.

**I have heard the process of putting out an album, or of creating a large body of work being compared to the act of childbirth. I've even made that comparison. What starts as a simple spark of energy or an idea begins to manifest and is then sort of incubated, labored over intensively, and then released. Now that you've actually given birth, I want to know, do those processes feel similar to you?**

I guess so. Women who have had babies know that you spend the first third of being pregnant being totally isolated because you can't tell anyone you're pregnant yet. So you're kind of alone. And that would be kind of like being alone with your ideas, the beginning, not having anyone understand what you're thinking about or going through. And then there's the sweet spot in the middle of pregnancy where you feel okay and people can tell you're pregnant. It might be like when you have a few songs done. But I don't know, I think that all in all, an album is something that you get to share and it becomes everyone else's. Once it comes out it's not even yours anymore. People are having their own relationship to it that has nothing to do with you. With a baby, it's different. I think in a lot of ways, the whole concept of having babies and being pregnant and still making art and all these things, they're issues I think about. But at the same

time, I feel like it's pretty mundane. This is just how the human race continues to exist. It's like, "Yeah I had a baby, so what? I made a human because that's something I can do, which is cool. I can still make other things, too." I'm just a person who likes to try new things. If there's something creative I could possibly do, I figure I should try to do it.

Hannah Lew recommends:

35mm photography

traveling in Japan and seeing the Cherry Blossoms

record shopping

yoga

Eurythmics - In The Garden, Yasuaki Shimizu - Kakashi, Michael Rother - Flammende Herzen, The Scorpions & Saif Abu Bakr - Jazz Jazz Jazz, Haruomi Hosono - Philharmony, Peter Baumann - Trans Harmonic Nights

Name

Hannah Lew

Vocation

Musician, Filmmaker, Visual artist

Fact

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