

# On finding common experiences that are otherwise impossible



An interview with artist and musician Liz Harris

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2351 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Mental health](#).

**How do you balance the performative/creative side of making a record with the technical side of engineering it?**

Mm, by staying simple and staying within parameters of what I know. I work best with limitation and impulse-friendly gear, never doing anything fancy with engineering. Just one mic into a tape deck or computer via simple interface. No high-res recording; basic multi-tracking in Ableton, sometimes blind mixing on just one track—I still use SoundForge 7 because I like the reverb plug ins and noise reduction, though my PC crashed a few years ago. I try to make it sound how I want on the way in rather than doing much post.

**There's a certain purity to that. Do you feel like you're making field recordings?**

They're imprints of an energy happening in that moment (10 minutes to a week or two). I can go back sometimes, but it's often more difficult then. A I A is an example of me trying hard to go back and change things. It got a little sick feeling, my experience of it, and the sound. Muddy the more I touched it.

**How important was the Wyoming landscape to *Grid Of Points*? in general, landscape and environments seem to creep into your work, and then you end up creating mirroring environments with your sounds. It feels like this connected world, with something vast about the minimalism. *Grid Of Points* feels so spacious. What's your favorite kind of landscape?**

There's an unintended irony there—the songs that are about real environments (as opposed to fantasy/metaphorical landscape) are about much warmer places, oppressive dry heat in CA/OR desert, Portland race tracks in summertime. Wyoming was having a severe cold snap when I was there writing and recording. I couldn't go outside casually, even to walk the 300 meters to the main residency building. Maybe froze the hiccups and heat panic into place. I went in with a specific, minimal set up in mind—taking texts I had for the most part already written, and making songs with them using only spare piano and lush, but spacious vocals. It must have helped that the landscape mirrored that simplicity; I am sure my being trapped inside also helped.

I didn't want to emphasize the residency story for this record. It's the main way I record lately, so, there's the threat of repetitive one sheets. With this album it felt distracting to focus on.

**When you got sick and stopped recording *Grid Of Points*, did you know right away that the album was complete, or did you come back to it and realize that later?**

No. I thought I might come back and record more. Since my voice was fucked from being sick anyhow I went with Tanja, an artist also at Ucross (she took the photo used for press), to meet and record with Grant Bulltail, a Crow storyteller in Thermopolis for a few days. We relaxed and hiked and went in the natural springs there. When I came back I knew I was done—recognized the fatigue and repulsion, plus my voice was still too ragged. But, now that I connect to the memory—I did record more. It's when I was back that we went out to a little ghost town (Ulm), where she took the photo of me. We saw a coal train coming; held out the mic just in time, coincidentally positioned to get a stereo recording of it passing.

**It feels like your work is often result of solitude, but also of seeing specific friends. How do you find the right mix? Is it something you can just feel?**

I don't plan much, don't think of it as me or under my control. It's like a weather pattern, outside of me. There is always some storm or wind pick-up coming and going, sometimes I walk out in it, but sometimes I stay inside or am asleep and miss it. But it's always there, I mean, for everyone.

**Have you ever decided to abandon a project, or do you generally try to make it work?**

Abandoning work isn't natural to me. I never learned to say no; I wasn't given choices growing up, but who knows, maybe being that way is just built-in. It didn't keep me from developing a strong aim and strong ideas, but I learned to do it all quietly as possible, without asking for permission or announcing it.

If I have an idea to do something I still always imagine someday I'll do it, feel I must do it, like an assignment come from outside of me. That can feel oppressive, the trust in place, the pressure not to let this thing down. I used to fantasize about music being something I could finally just be done with. Like it was a demon or a drug; high sometimes, others drained. And where it took me in life, sometimes felt it was a terrible trap.

**Do you get creative blocks? If so, what do you do to move past them?**

No, though I don't tend to think that way. I have no expectations. I'm committed to respecting and devoting myself to it, as long as that remains relevant and honest; only a small portion of that looks like playing. I go long times without picking up an instrument. I'm not a musician really. If anything I've tried to block it, in the past, purposely keep myself from playing. That's the main issue I've had around creation. After years of recording every night I began to compartmentalize it, to keep it from overtaking my life. It may be more balanced now. I have often felt a discomfort talking about music or identifying personally with it.

**When you say you're not a musician, do you think of yourself more as an artist in general? Or, do you mean, technically speaking, you're not a musician?**

Technically, so far as a common musical language is concerned. I can't pick up a guitar and play what I want. Don't know any chords. Which is part of why I feel so little ownership. I'll have an idea, but what happens is usually different. It has also led to a sense of isolation, people asking me to play something specific for them or improvise with them, me not knowing how, or feeling embarrassed to explain that I don't know how to repeat myself or speak the common language. At the one language I've developed, I am fluent. I'm just alone with it sometimes, and it doesn't help with other life challenges, like dating or balancing a checkbook. I imagine it is something akin to getting really good at a video game, developing a skill that cannot be shared with other skill-sets. I'm an idiot in many other departments; remembering to eat, doing laundry, finishing sentences.

**Do you like performing to audiences? It feels like your work is so private or personal.**

To some degree I've lost perspective on it. I used to feel a lot of pain around performance, but also felt compelled to do it. I don't get a straightforward high off it, but have felt rewarded many times by pushing through. I'm interested in common experiences that are otherwise impossible. A room of people feeling together while paradoxically still having a separate experience. That's an interesting set up. If I hear that someone really enjoyed a show, it touches me. I like a person to person connection.

**Do you imagine you'll make music for the rest of your life?**

Anyone's guess. I was just getting into something that felt new the last year or two, branching off work that began with *HYPNOSIS DISPLAY*, but it's been heavy lately and a lot feels

on pause. Taking care of my heart and people I care about encompasses so much more than playing music. I used to only need music, but that has changed. [The Niyhek](#) release is what I'm most excited about; beyond that who knows. I guess as long as it makes sense.

**How do you nourish your creative side when you're not working?**

I had to consider this question a while before it made sense. Maybe I don't nourish myself well, or am not sure when I'm not working. If I'm not playing, I'm chewing work and thoughts behind it all the time. The daytime world is a small slice. But, the real straightforward answer is that I hang out with and talk to my 16 year old dog Rose. All the time. I hold her and talk to her and give her treats. She's my dog child, blind and deaf. I can tell if she's thirsty by the change in her gait. And I like saunas, walking, strong black coffee, working in my yard, staring at the river mouth, watching parked ships swing around with the tide.

**What's a habit you find yourself returning to when you make work? Do you fight against it or accept it as part of you?**

Shutting others out. I struggle with that, and I accept it. I think a better/grayer balance is possible; I've worked towards that.

**What does your curiosity look like? How do you explore things?**

Best alone or unwatched at least, with lots of space and time, and then, no boundaries, at least when I was small, and sometimes today. I have to make hard walls in order to relay any of it. If I feel too seen or checked upon I freeze. I was teased too much I think, for spacing out, for not being a great word-user. I couldn't explain to anyone what I was doing, talking to rocks and animals, feeling electricity coming off the ocean.

**How do you avoid burnout?**

I've burnt out many times. My ears are singing with tinnitus as we speak. I figure it out as or after, because canceling is too hard for me, and then take a break; then try to learn. I'm a slow learner. I tend first to assume that it's me who needs to catch up rather than tailoring an experience to fit the space that works best for my shape. I've learned a lot about bloodwork, adaptogens, alternative medicine. I go as slow as possible. After years of touring I can now plan days off in between, no early travel days, a nice place to sleep (it's not luxurious to take care of your health or enjoy your work; that is a capitalist/patriarchal myth.) I'll choose to take slightly less work if I can, and opt to visit a friend/family, or have a rest. I vent to my friends when people give me shit. And I have been working with friends for live sound, Kassian Troyer this last trip; that has really helped to reduce stress.

**What do you consider failure and how can you find success in it?**

Well I'm failing constantly by some standards (unplanned course/aesthetic mutation/inability to repeat myself/disinterest in press or capitalizing efficiently or thoroughly), but I don't think of those as failures. Failure to me would be agreeing to a parameter that doesn't honor basic values or a work. If I agreed to let a company use my work simply because they offer me the right money, or let them fly their brand behind me, that would be a failure. I would be an empty bag. This doesn't mean I haven't licensed music, I just do so very carefully.

**What is something you wish someone told you when you began to make art?**

If you keep doing *anything* long enough you will have to take up space, and have clear boundaries, and when you do so, you will encounter anger and accusations, and general bullshit. "No"s or a request will sometimes translate into anger or "she's demanding" or may simply be ignored. But this is not a reason not to make work, or ask for what that work requires. If you persist, some people will fall off, and the experience of that might be hard, but when you stick to your values despite the chaos, folks you do align with will come forward.

There is one thing I did tell myself early on, before even beginning to record, after a shitty experience in art and film worlds of LA, that still grounds me. I told myself that money would never, ever, be the only reason for me to do anything. There must always also be a compelling additional reward-for a real person or community or for the piece of work itself.

**What are some of your favorite ways to communicate, besides words?**

Words I only like when I have lots of time to form them or can use them more like paint or rocks, thrown around loosely.

I spent a lot of childhood talking to ghosts by inviting them to move my body a certain way or make me walk somewhere, use a pen I was holding to send me messages; working at made-up methods of telepathy. I needed friends. I think it's ok to laugh at this, and I believe in what happened. Some of it was truly demonic. Mostly it was magical.

I have dream syncs with my friend Alina, and also with my mother. I had an exhilarating sail the other day, reminded I was risking my life, while Alina dreamt I was on the ocean and telling her I was going to drown as waves grew larger.

**Water seems important to, or at least in, your work.**

I feel edgy when I'm not near it. I look to landscape when I need clarity or relief, water most especially. Reminds me of everything I need to know.

**Liz Harris' five things:**

There is nothing to being clean

Walk a bright mark down the sidewalk

the River is an open mouth, the Boats pass through it

A Rotting Face appears (a Piece of Chalk in texture)

My line drawn out where the light hits

Name

Liz Harris

Vocation

Musician, Producer, Visual Artist







Photo credit: Tyler Little

