

February 6, 2017 - Katie Alice Greer is the singer of the D.C. punk band Priests and a solo artist under her initials, K.A.G. She's also a writer, activist, and runs the label Sister Polygon with her Priest bandmates.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3086 words.

Tags: Music, Politics, Independence.

Katie Alice Greer on why all art is political

Your music's always been political. As someone who's been thinking about this all along, what's it like when suddenly everything is political? Has it shifted your approach? Has it confirmed what you were already doing?

I don't think that the election results shifted my approach to my work. It was the worst outcome possible, obviously, but the kind of work I do would have been similar had someone besides Donald Trump been elected. I hate the conversations that frame art around the idea of there being "political art" and "non-political art." That's always been a false binary to me. It's kind of like when people say that art is beautiful or important. I think if we're going to have conversations about art, it's best to avoid words like that, and actually explain why we think art is political, or art is beautiful, or art is important.

Coming from the idea that my art has always been political, other people's art, in my understanding, has always been political. I don't really see our reality right now as being new or different. Things are going to be shittier for the next four years, but it's not radically different.

It's going to be hard and terrible, and we all have to get ready for what's happening, but there are a lot of little things that we can do that this administration won't be stripping away from us immediately. We can refocus where we're putting our resources, and how we're talking about people, and what we value with our conversations and our dialogues.

It's like, you see the people who are the least vulnerable really running around like a chicken with their head cut off right now, whereas people who have been vulnerable all along are like, "Oh. Welcome. I've been living here forever."

This is going to be awful in many ways, but there have always been things to rally against, and things to think about, and things to try to shift.

Right. During the Obama years, I feel like a lot of my conversations with people in my work ended up being a critique of neoliberalism, which I'm going to be critical of no matter who's in charge. Having a regime in power now that really is leaning towards a kind of fascism that I don't think we've seen in United States elected leaders in a long time means that I have to re-prioritize what my work is about.

Sure, I'm still critical of neo-liberalism. But if anything, I am, and I think probably many of us, are fighting to get healthcare, or trying to keep it, trying to make our communities safe for our friends and neighbors who aren't white, or aren't straight, or aren't cis gender. Pop culture is dictated by who is in power, whether you're talking about people who are elected by the money that we spend, or talking about people who are literally elected by votes for a president or something like that.

We've had a culture for the past eight years that, most recently, birthed an album like [Solange's] *A Seat at the Table*, which I loved so much. Every time I listen to that record, it has made me cry.

I don't think that we're necessarily going to continue to see music like that for the next four years, because people are walking down the street and are worried about just being physically attacked, you know? It seems like a big jump, to be like, "Art is going to change, because people don't feel as safe to really dive in and speak about certain issues," but those things are very connected.

All of us need resources to make art. You can't make that out of thin air. Art is always tied to the marketplace, that's always going to be such an influence on what people are making their art about. But I don't think a lot of people are going to wake up and scan the headlines and be like, "Huh. I don't think that art about police brutality is going to get as much sponsorship or attention or advertising dollars, so I won't make art about that anymore." It's not going to be that cut and dry.

As trends and cultural values change, and as who is in power shifts, I think we'll see that influence what people are making their work about. I feel like I've had this conversation with people a little bit recently, about how when Priests first started as a band, it seemed like making political music wasn't very popular. Part of our antagonism at first was like, "We're going to be really outspoken, and fuck all these boring people who have nothing to say!"

But now, we're in a very different cultural context, where Beyoncé is saluting the Black Panthers at the Super Bowl. On one hand, that's really cool, and so necessary, but on the other hand, I'm always a little bit wary of putting too much faith in pop stars, or people who have a lot of the marketplace tied into their work, because as soon as that isn't the interest of cultural taste makers anymore, the people who get their power and agency from those places will make their work about something else. I have mixed feelings about celebrities making big statements.

One one hand, I'm always really drawn to people who are able to take a pop medium for their art and flip its intended purpose on its head. The intended purpose of a pop medium is usually to sell products. Artists who are able to take that medium and use it to spread a really radical idea to a broad group of people who might not even agree with them—but who could start a lot of conversation around it—is really exciting to me.

At the same time, I think that we can't always rely on that, and especially I anticipate in the Trump years, a lot of us are going to have to be a lot more coded about what we mean. Not because we have to directly worry about Trump silencing us—I don't know if that's going to happen, but then again, I don't really know. Maybe it could. Just because there are lots of people who either support Trump directly or support him by proxy him of supporting the status quo who might not get down with supporting subversive work. But we have a culture that is entirely dictated by the marketplace. We don't have value systems that reward artists who ask people to think.

These things become so difficult to talk about, because everyone tries to frame the work as, "Who are you talking shit about when you say things like this?" Or "How can I frame this as a personal attack?" Because that will get more attention than artists who are speaking out on systemic roadblocks in the creative industry. That sounds boring to people. If you're like, "Oh, man, this guy was talking mad shit on this guy"... people love stuff like that.

It's a lot harder to just raise things as an open indictment of a system, rather than of people. And we reward talking about things in the most hyperbolic context possible. I'm not saying people shouldn't be held responsible for their actions, or that we shouldn't examine artists' choices, but really, we all need to ask: "What do we culturally value with the money that we spend? With where we put our attention?"

Something I've been thinking about recently is the AEG owner, Philip Anschutz, and his connection to Coachella and Bowery Presents. If a smaller artist were to say, "I'm not going to play Coachella," or "I'm going to donate my money instead of playing," maybe it doesn't make that huge of a mark. But if someone like Radiohead, or Beyoncé, who have been outspoken about their politics, and are actually both playing, decide to say, "You know what? We're not going to play this"... that'd be huge. I know it's not cut and dry, but that actually could make a change. It means you need to move beyond the pageantry of politics and shift to where you're maybe not going to get a paycheck.

Totally. I think that all of this stuff is so contextual. Smaller artists who don't have a lot of money, I would be like, "Play Coachella. Get that paycheck." You know? We all know that artists don't make a lot of money. You can't really be too choosy about where your money's coming from. Or if you can, that's a real privilege. That should be taken into consideration. But no, I totally agree. If bigger artists were like, "Actually, we're not going to play this, and we're going to set up a guerrilla show outside of Coachella where Beyoncé's going to play," I'm sure the legalese around the show would make that incredibly difficult, with contracts and things like that, but that would be like a performative protest that I would be really excited about and could get behind.

I'm interested in looking at when protest, and performance of politics in protest, is actually useful and inspiring and energizing to people, and when that is done to appear to be a feminist, or appear to be on the right side to get the cookies or something. It's very easy nowadays to use the right lingo. That's also why I get a little bit concerned when speaking out becomes trendy or marketable. People can very easily co-opt that language, and use how to say the right things without ever actually doing the actions necessary.

I try to be aware of that with myself, too. I don't think this is necessarily right for everybody, but I really scaled back on my Twitter, not because I think Twitter is inherently bad, but I was just thinking, "Okay, if I try to use this medium less, that's asking me to just talk without action, maybe I can force myself to act more and get out of just talking about it."

I think that in the social media age, there's such an emphasis on performing to each other when we communicate online. I don't think that that's wrong, but... I saw an all-dude band post last week on Twitter that they were about to announce a tour where they were only playing with other men, which seemed really shocking to me. You almost have to go out of your way at this point to make that happen. I just thought that the idea to even post that really reveals the kind of culture we're in right now, where people want to preempt the call-out and perform their woke-ness, so to speak, to try to either get the likes or the retweets, and avoid any sort of dialog about this, and even further, avoid making necessary changes, so that you're not actually going on an all-male tour. Like, Jesus Christ. What are you doing?

It also just completely erases all the work that goes into being involved in the music industry or playing shows that has nothing to do with performers on stage. There are so many roles that you didn't hire any women for. Wow!

I read this study a couple years ago that was saying how announcing that you're going to do something, or sharing your plans, when you get positive affirmations on that, your brain releases the same chemicals as it would as if you had actually done the actions. It kind of explained why people liked to share what they want to do so much on social media, and how maybe that is discouraging us from actually following through on our plans a lot of times, whether it's a New Year's resolution, or the kind of art you want to make, or even for non-artists, just other plans. Again, I'm definitely not being "Twitter's bad!" Or "We should stop talking about important things we want to do!" We should definitely do that, but I think that putting action behind what we say our plans are is even more important.

The record you put out in 2014 was called *Bodies and Control and Money and Power*, which is clearly a political title. The new record's called *Nothing Feels Natural*. It's political, but less explicitly so. Did you do that intentionally?

I think so. I actually wrote the title of the record before I wrote any lyrics for the record. I just told the band, "I think this is what it should be called," and fortunately they were like, "Yeah. Cool." I really liked that title, just because it had so many different meanings to it. I've always been a person who is very preoccupied with understanding normative values, and what those mean to different people. I guess that plays into it, for me. I don't actually know how to act natural, I don't think.

I do sort of feel like I'm always performing, not in a way that I think I'm being false, or not myself, but more in line with this idea I read once in an Avital Ronell interview. She was talking about how Western culture always demonizes femininity for being obsessed with makeup and being duplicitous and wearing a mask. She was like, "Why do we look at makeup in this way, when it should really be a celebration of the multiplicity of being alive, and the many different faces we all wear, and the many different truths that we communicate?"

You were saying that it seems maybe less direct. It is less direct, because I'm an artist. I'm not an activist. I am an activist, too. I never want to sacrifice my politics for my art; I never want to sacrifice my art for my politics. I see them as two very connected circles in a Venn diagram. As soon as one is being compromised for the other, that's not actually an outcome that I want.

It's separated, but it's also always connected. I get so tired of people describing art as political art. It's all political. When somebody says, "I want to leave politics out of this," that's actually just coded language for, "I want to passively support the status quo and not have anybody get mad at me for it."

On the flip side, yeah, that seems like a really boring conversation to just say that someone's art is political. You should really be just talking about what they're trying to get across, which is like, isn't that always what we're talking about when we're talking about art?

To me, successful art isn't someone wagging their finger at you or spelling it out on a chalkboard. I mean, maybe it is, if it's literature or the written word. Successful art you have to unpack, because it's interrogating you or what your idea of reality is, or what the world means, or is very beautiful or very complicated, very ugly. It should always be something that you are drawn to it because of its magnetism, and it's asking you to unpack it, rather than coercing you into it by being so explicit.

There's also the action of self-releasing your music. You don't need to be explicitly political; it's often how you structure your life, which you can do quietly.

Oh, completely. I think that for a long time, between making the EP and releasing this record, I've really struggled with trying to figure out if art or music making was an industry that I wanted to pursue. At first when I became familiarized to it, I was scratching my head a lot of times being like, "This is so fucked, the way that all this works." I worked at a restaurant, and I've done many other side jobs. You just, at some point, have to come to the realization that all industries are fucked, because we live under capitalism. For me, personally, pursuing musicianship or artistry as a job just makes sense in a practical way, because I spend all my time doing this, so it would be nice to just get paid for it, rather than saying, "I don't want to have to think about money with this. I want to make my money from something else." I don't have enough hours in the day to do that.

We had a song on our second tape called "USA Incantations" that's a straight up speech about inequity in the United States, the history of this country, and what we're built on. I don't really like to perform it very much, because I'd really hate for people to think I was ever talking down to them. The song was originally written for one of the first times we played a legitimate venue in DC. We thought the ticket price was expensive and that it would be a cool interrogation of the space we were playing in.

I don't necessarily like to play that song all the time now, because I don't want to talk down the audience or condescend to them. I like having it in the background of our catalogue. It's kind of like you were saying, we don't need to always be beating people over the head with our politics, in the same way that when I'm talking to my friends, I don't need to constantly be reminding them of why I think it's so important that we own the means to production whenever we can. It's already implied in the work we're doing.

Katie Alice Greer recommends:

1. a theory: that all art is political, that ethics + aesthetics are two different sides of the same coin
2. a film: *It Felt Like A Kiss*, directed by Adam Curtis
3. an essay: "Pay Attention" by Chris Kraus, from the book *Video Green*
4. a song: Barbara Dane + the Chambers Brothers - "It Isn't Nice"
5. a book: *Assata: An Autobiography* by Assata Shakur
6. a story: "Everything and Nothing" by Jorge Luis Borges
7. a 7" that is stupidly cheap on discogs right now: *Teenbeat 100*

8. an album: Susan Cadogan - *Susan Cadogan*
9. an album: Bobbie Gentry - Ode To Billie Joe
0. an album: Crazy Band - Fuck You
1. an album: Sharon Van Etten - Are We There
2. an idea: genre is a tool of the marketplace, not music-making

Name

Katie Alice Greer

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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