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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2519 words.

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On finding and rediscovering your voice

Musician Amelia Randall Meath (Sylvan Esso, Mountain Man) discusses looking back at your older work, processing things by speaking them aloud, and the need for conversation, community, and magic.

You're looking back on 10 years of Mountain Man's Made the Harbor and a re-issue of the debut Sylvan Esso album from 2014. Do you enjoy revisiting past work?

It depends on how far away from it I am. Usually I really don't like the thing that I just made. After I'm able to get a good seven years away from something, six or seven years, I can look back on it, and it kind of feels like looking at somebody's work who's not me, which is nice. I don't think I would ever really listen to anything that I've made for pleasure necessarily, because it feels like trying on the clothes you used to wear in eighth grade or something like that. I have been grappling with being able to see *Made the Harbor* as an independent, creative thing, because it's such a weird, sad little, fun, creep of a record.

Can you recognize yourself in those songs a decade later?

So much of it feels like looking at a little baby version of me. In that a lot of the things that I'm writing about are really wild. "Mouthwings" was one of the first songs I ever wrote, and in it, I talk about the fact that I'm going to have a baby, which I'm not sure of now. It's so interesting to hear myself having said that, as if it were a reality. Maybe I was just trying it on then. Usually the way I tend to process things is by saying them out loud and then seeing how they feel, and it felt much more comfortable to say then than it does now.

What are key factors that have allowed you to develop your songwriting and singing voice?

Voices are so impressionable all of the time. It's one of the reasons why so many people, when they begin singing, accidentally start singing in a British accent because they think that sounds cool. In terms of figuring out how to actually let myself have my own voice, my mother was very good at being very encouraging, and also saying, "Don't sound like somebody else, use your true voice." Which in some ways I really appreciate, but one of the magical parts of discovering an instrument is the way that you can manipulate it and move it around. That's something I've been thinking about a lot, or particularly in terms of thinking about the more avant garde singing world that Mountain Man tends to listen to—Meredith Monk, strange noises that I find really exciting and are the antithesis of authentic voice in some ways. Or maybe they're actually completely it. Maybe that's the most authentic you can be, beyond language.

In terms of writing, I think one of the many, myriad gifts of Mountain Man was that it was created at the perfect, young age where I had almost no ability to feel self-conscious about what I was writing. Which I think might be why it's so exciting when a 17-year-old writes songs. All the self-hatred is brand new. There's less of the ability to cover it up, or more of an ability to be honest within it.

Voices can also change so much over a lifetime. What's your current relationship with yours?

I could talk about voices all day long. I do like how I sound, I've always loved singing, but the thing I like isn't really about the sounds that I'm making, and more about pressing the air out of my body and into the world. Which sounds kind of like farting, but the fact that your voice is an actual negative imprint of your insides, and you are sharing it with people, is just so magical. I just think that music is actual magic, and we don't talk about how songs actually change space and time. And we're able to do

that with our bodies. It's so silly to me that we do that and simultaneously are like "magic doesn't exist," because it totally does. This is actual magic. Songs are spells.

In a recent interview you shared that "so much of love is trying to figure out how you want to be perceived or seen." In addition to finding an authentic singing voice, has stepping into a producer role helped solidify what you want to get across with Sylvan Esso?

I think so. I've gotten more comfortable with doing it with Sylvan Esso, but I was thinking back on *Made the Harbor*, and I did a lot of arranging for so many of those songs. I've just been realizing that part of hitting the note on the last record of being like, "I am a producer now," was mostly being like, I should say that I am because I've been figuring out that that's what I've been doing this whole time. I'm not an engineer, but I am very particular and opinionated. Putting two and two together, realizing that was also production, was hard. As a little MySpace baby, my creativity was very stunted by the "one sad, sad guy in his room playing everything" trope, and because I couldn't fit that, I had a lot of trouble realizing that I was a producer.

What Mountain Man asks of a live audience is very different from Sylvan Esso. Are you able to enter more of a flow state in one more readily?

Really they're two sides of the same coin. They're trying to get to the same thing, but through different extremes. The thing is presence. And being able to be involved. The two bands are just on the completely opposite spectrum, but to me they're both reaching for the same thing, which is, together we have changed and created the space, by either being very quiet together or raging. That's been slowly revealing itself.

Your writing process isn't tied to a specific instrument, rather you describe it as "writing in the air." How does that look/feel?

It's moved, and I know how to play the guitar now much better than I ever have, so I can write songs on the guitar, but I find that I get the most creative and interesting parts when I'm vocalizing and making sound in the air. I haven't talked to other songwriters, but I think everybody does this but no one really talks about it, because they also play an instrument. It's much easier to explain to people how you write songs by saying, "Well, I have a guitar," or a piano or something like that. But really, I think it's just a bunch of people singing into the air and finding something fun.

The difference is that usually, I don't immediately go and find what chord it is. I record it into my phone and then maybe find it or display it for Sandy. That's a really fun part of collaboration, if you write something in the air, anyone can imagine chords under it. It's been shoved in a direction, but you can make a lot of wild choices.

Where do you keep your ideas stored?

I do the magnetic field test of, if it's good enough, you're going to remember it later, and then I record it into my phone. When I'm actually hammering out what the lyrics truly are, I rewrite and rewrite it over and over again in long hand. Every time I begin new attempts, I write the full song out, or what I have. It's fun, it leads to a lot of incredibly redundant notebooks.

Is there a specific time of day or sequence of events that trigger ideas?

Pretty much every time we start writing a record, it feels like I'm re-discovering how I write songs, or when it's a good time to do it. I really like writing during the day, or sometimes I like writing around 8:00. Sometimes when I'm sick-I've written a lot of songs when I've had double ear infections and have been up in the middle of the night.

It's wild that even when the body is not at its strongest it can still be a vehicle for creativity.

Totally. For me it functions as escape. You are in pain, and the easiest way to distract from that is to be consumed by something else.

Most of your songs aren't written from the first person perspective. Have you always been drawn to songs that leave room for interpretation?

Kind of. I realized when I started writing that it could be cool if it wasn't completely, only about me. There are some songwriters that are just really good at writing songs from their perspective, but it doesn't feel like they're writing from their perspective. Joni Mitchell and Jenn Wasner are great at that. So many songs that are definitely about someone's experience. I've found that I have begun doing that. "Die Young" is first person perspective, or a lot of the songs on Free Love are. "Free" is completely me talking. When I began writing, I knew that being like "I feel this way," was never really something I was interested in. I'm actually having a lot more trouble now after the pandemic, getting emotionally invested in people talking about their feelings in that way.

Any idea what's led to that?

I don't know. I've been trying to figure it out. It could also be that I'm becoming an old bitch. So much room for that. Here's what it is... there's a way that people talk about their feelings, where they write songs about their feelings where they're acting like they're letting you in on something emotional and intimate, but they don't actually go there.

They're telling you that they're going to go there, but they don't.

They don't. It's lies and it makes me mad. If you're going to ask for my attention, give me intimacy.

I wonder if that's tied to vulnerability.

This could just be where I'm at in general right now. It's pop songs that I'm getting really mad at. The really good pop songs always say something that's true, that hasn't been articulated, or that feels raw and vulnerable in a way that's shocking. Some of them are very light. The thing I think is so brave about pop music is that it's people saying things we all know so well that are embarrassing to say, and figuring out a way to say it in a way that makes people be able to look at it.

You and [Sylvan Esso bandmate and husband] Nick [Sanborn] do such a wonderful job of flipping the script by writing sad songs that sound happy. Is that a characteristic that you're drawn to?

Yeah. I love that. Mostly because they're closer to the human experience than other songs are, I think, in some ways. For example Kacey Musgraves' "Happy and Sad." I love that song so much and it drives me completely insane.

Tell me about [your recording studio] Betty's and what the vision is for that space.

Betty's is a studio with two rooms that also has a five bedroom house, and it's on ten and a half acres in the woods in Chapel Hill. First we started building it because Nick and I needed a place to work, and then we slowly started realizing that we could make it into a space that we could have people come to make things with us and also to make things for himself, and then slowly figured out that we could create the creative oasis of our dreams, or as close to our imagining of our dreams right now.

That's been really amazing. I haven't worked there that much, which is funny. I made a record that hasn't been announced yet and Nick and I are just starting to work on our new record. I guess we made Free Love there, but we made it in the B room while the A room was getting built.

It's being built with both collaboration and community in mind.

Yeah. That's the dream-creating community. This job is already so isolating anyway, that I found that everything that I do outside of it is just doubling down on the people I love and maybe even meeting new people. That sounds kind of scary right now, but I need to meet new people in order to be creative.

That was something the pandemic really highlighted for me. That I need to be having conversations with people I don't know as much as I possibly can, because otherwise I'm in my own thoughts in a way that doesn't lead to creativity.

What conversations led to the formation of [the artist-run recording company] Psychic Hotline?

We've been constantly trying to figure out a way to be more and more independent in our small business that we run. More often than not, as I follow what's been funding my records, it's things that I don't fucking believe in. Usually, when you get down to the bottom of it, it's oil, still. I hate that. I've been very lucky in my career to always have labels that are supportive of my creativity, but I still just don't want to have to have a step where I talk to people about what I'm making, or where I have to sell it in any other way, other than just doing it. In a lot of ways, I have already had that, but I love that with Psychic Hotline there will be the ability for us to just make things in a different way.

I'm in the midst of a weird personal reckoning with all of the gamification of music and the persona. I was realizing that I was starting to both be disappointed when people thought that our band was too big, and be disappointed when people thought that our band, what I was perceiving, and this is all my own projection, either being too big or too small, and feeling bad no matter what. I don't know how I got there, I think, honestly, it's a boost of anxiety from not getting to do my job for so long.

How has touring felt recently?

It's felt good. It's really nice to be back out. It's different because the pandemic is still happening, and we're in the demographic of people who are very community-minded and might not be ready to be back out, which I understand. That being said, it's been wonderful to be able to just go out and play shows and feel like we're in community again with people who like our band. It's the best thing, it's so fun, and it makes me feel fulfilled. It's my favorite thing, playing shows.

Amelia Randall Meath Recommends:

All Day Gentle Hold! - Porches

Practical Magic - Alice Hoffman

Maintenance Phase (Podcast)

Hades (Video Game)

Name

Amelia Randall Meath

Vocation

musician, songwriter, producer

Fact

Shervin Lainez

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