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As told to Tyler Bussey, 3842 words.

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On showing up as yourself

Musician Kristine Leschper discusses the power of listening, letting go of professionalism, and finding peace in your process

Do you feel like, fundamentally, you are making music for the same reasons that you were when you first started?

I do. For me, music has always been a way to feel around in my environment, and figure out where things are. It's a way of making sense of the world around me, and a way of coping with it. That's always the way that I have come to make music, is having a feeling, and going, "How do I do something with this feeling?" Or, "Where do I put it?" It's always come out of that same place for me.

That being said, I think over the years, growing as a musician, getting to know myself better as a musician, I have more awareness about that. Early music-writing for me was just really raw. I didn't really know how to write songs yet. Songwriting, I think, is an intuitive practice, but it also is a skill. It's a craft. It's a muscle that you work, and you get better at, and you learn from people who have been doing it for a long time. I didn't have that in the beginning. I didn't have that knowledge of songwriting. I was just feeling around in there.

But I feel like over the years, I've become a more active listener, and become more interested in songwriting as a craft, and as something to actually work towards. I approach it the same way. I'm still going, "Okay, this is a feeling and an emotion that I want to put somewhere and share with other people." I have more tools, I think, which has made it easier to write songs, but I think it still comes from the same place.

Would you say that the way you listen has changed?

Yes. I've become a much deeper listener. I wonder if I can trace back to where that sort of began, because it's a little unclear where that changed for me. I think over the years of playing music has made me a more compassionate listener, just understanding all of the difficulties, the fear, the uncertainty of going into making a song and sharing it with other people.

I think listening is the most important component of writing music, or playing music, and certainly playing music with other people. More specifically, over the last few months, I've been really interested in Pauline Oliveros and her deep listening practices. This is a new development for me that I am excited about, and that I think could potentially make me an even better listener; I'd like to follow that line a little further, and it's like, if it makes me a better listener, maybe it could make me a better musician, even.

I've been meeting with a group of people who were following her Sonic Meditations book. Something that you and I have talked about a lot, actually, is the line between performer and spectator, and creating a participatory environment. Something [Oliveros] talks about in *Sonic Meditations* is how ancient forms of music and singing together totally preclude spectators. There are no spectators. Everyone in the community is singing. Everyone's participating. That is really, really exciting to me. I've been going through some of her meditations, and trying to decide what deep listening means to me. That's a newer part of the journey that I'm on.

Can you locate an example of you embracing craft?

I think it's this authority-of-lived-experience thing, more than a specific moment of something changing.

I think the longer that you do something, you start to feel in your body what works and what doesn't. It's like there's the lived experience of making something, and going, "Well, that didn't really work. How could I do that better next time?" Or seeing and hearing something, or reading something, and dissecting it, and going, "Wow, this really works, and why does it work?"

I don't know if I can locate a specific point in time. I think it's more just the compounding of lived experience, and trying, and failing, and trying, and failing, and sometimes hitting. Trying and failing again, and watching other people do the same thing.

Learning primarily by doing it yourself, not from studying other people and what they did?

Yeah, for the most part. But of course, it's like we were just talking earlier about how music doesn't exist in a vacuum. We're all influencing each other across time and space, and through different cultures, meeting each other. Of course, it's through my lived experience, but also the way that I come into contact with others who do the same things.

Do you remember ever trying to do something specifically because you heard it somewhere else, and it gave you an idea?

Of course. On the last record that I made, I was really inspired by samba rhythms. There's a song on that album, "Figure and I"... Nelson Cavaquinho, I listened to one of his songs, and my understanding is that this is a very common samba rhythm, with the kick drum doing this, "da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum." When I was listening to that music, it felt so good in my body, and I was like, "Well, that's the rhythm of this song." It just felt like I grabbed it, not just out of that song, but out of that tradition as a whole.

It was just kind of like, "Oh, this... Yeah, this is what it's supposed to be," and I could feel that in my body. I feel like I'm often pulling very specific things out of songs. Another song on that record has... It's not a vibraslap. It was something I heard for the first time in a Wings song. It's a little wiggly-sounding, it's a piece of metal. It has a ball on it. You hit the ball, and then you bend the metal and it goes... It's a flexatone! I had first heard it on that song "Arrow Through Me" by Paul McCartney and Wings. It was like, "Wow, that's an incredible sound. I've got to put that in my song."

Which song did that end up in?

"Blue." What else? I don't know. I'm always taking specific things.

I like the idea that there's this natural refinement of your intuition, of the things that you're gravitating towards. You're able to more clearly identify them too, and find them faster.

Yeah. They become more obvious to you.

And there's this process of trying to identify these sounds that we love, so that we can wield them - you have to know what the thing is in order to put it on your record, or learn how to play these rhythms that you really like.

Absolutely. There's a sense of discovery there, also. It's like, you hear something, and you're like, "I've got to know what that is." I have notes about things that I want to rip off.

Something that I really love, when I detect it in someone's work, is I love when an artist is showing me what they love.

Oh, yeah. That's like the gift—that's the best thing about it.

A lot of people don't necessarily make music with that as a principle.

Ah, yeah. It's kind of like, curatorial. It's like I'm grabbing all of these different influences, these things that I really, really like, and I'm putting them in one place for you. Which creates a new world, a new thing, potentially. Or it's like... I love how... We've talked about George Saunders before. I love how when George Saunders is teaching English, teaching writing, how he talks about helping the students find their iconic space. It's not necessarily about being an incredible writer, but it's about gathering the experiences that you've had, and the things that resonate with you in the world, and putting them all in one place, and writing the thing that only you could write, just because of your background and because of the things that you love. It doesn't even have to do with how "good" it is, it's just about how you it is.

I love the idea of the task of a musician is to curate all these things that really speak to you, and to send them through this blender that is your expression. Whatever tools you have at your disposal, whatever instruments you know how to play, and however you can put those things back into the world, and celebrate them, and also create something new.

In the past year, the music you've been working on has been more stripped down. You did this solo tour, and you did this Instagram post, where you were saying, "I don't really know what this is going to be. I'm embracing that. I want it to be a little bit more off the cuff, I want to embrace being present, and embrace where my enthusiasm is right now, right here." I thought that was intriguing and different for where you'd been before. I'm curious about where that came from.

I've been feeling a real rejection of...“professionalism,” which I think is such a part of our cultural experience at this point. This sense of needing to—well, knowing that you're going to be perceived by a lot of people, especially if you're online, or even just as a performer—this sense of showing up as a professional, professionalizing yourself to be taken seriously.

I've sometimes felt like I needed to build a frame around myself, to say, “I matter,” or to build a frame around myself that says, “I'm serious about this. I care about this.” I think there's a way to do it that doesn't have anything to do with professionalism. I think for a couple of years, I thought that the way to communicate to people that I deeply care about what I'm doing was to have this really professional outlook, to show up with a really well-rehearsed band, to book this tour in advance, and to have everything really planned out. I'm starting to feel like there's a way to show up, and to show people that you have a reverence for your craft, without all of that showiness.

I also feel like the showiness, the professionalism, is really distancing. Because on one hand you want to say, “Take me seriously. I really care about this. Please, please respect me.” But then that really separates you from the people who are coming to your shows. Because the whole point of it is to say, “I'm different,” or, “I'm serious about this. Respect me. Please, take me seriously,” but then it tries to say, “I'm not a person.” I'm much more interested now in just showing up as the person I am, in showing reverence for music, and for performance and sharing, just through really showing up and being present.

Did it prevent you from showing up as who you were?

Yeah. I feel like it creates a barrier. Or it did for me, which is what it's supposed to do a little bit, from a self-preservation point. There were times in my life when I was touring a lot, and it felt, in a way, I needed that. But then I think it also, it really hurt me, because I was doing all this touring with this cool distance from the people who were coming to the shows, and it made it all feel really pointless. All I [really] want to do is play music and connect with people, and share space with them.

Professionalism, for me, gets in the way. I would rather it be like the tour that I did in October with Anna McClellan. I wanted to do that tour really as a way to hang out with Anna, and to get to know her, and to hear her music every night. It was the first time that touring was really an act of friendship for me. I was excited to play music, but I really wanted to explore friendship with her, and see what it would be like to travel together and play shows.

On that tour it felt like the music was just this wonderful by-product of us being together, and traveling together. It was what we were coming together to do and share with other people, but it was really affirming, just in its friendliness. I was ill-rehearsed, because a lot of the music I wrote for that tour, some of it I was writing on my drive to the first show [laughs]. On the way to the first show, I had a little extra time and I stopped at a rest stop and I climbed into the back of my truck, and I had a little portable keyboard and my notebook, and I crawled into the back of the truck, closed myself in, and I kept working on some of the verses of the music, because it wasn't really quite ready for the first show. That was so thrilling.

Because part of the professionalism is kind of this, like, “I know exactly what I'm doing.” And I don't! [laughs] None of us do. It was too much of a facade for me to maintain. I couldn't do it anymore. Amateurism, or a willingness to say, “I'm exploring something here, and I'm going to make mistakes,” feels so much better to me, and it makes me feel like I can show up as myself on stage.

Obviously, I have a lot of opinions about this too, as someone who's toured a lot.

It can be really bad for you.

It can be really bad for you, and it can steal time away from the things that put you in front of people in the first place.

Yes. Exploring music in your solitude. Which is my resting—that's my home place. When I first started writing music, it was so much about this limited audience, and knowing that my friends were going to come to my show, and that they were going to hear it. The music was for me, but it was also for them. I think being observed on a larger scale, putting records out and having strangers listen to your music, I do think, for me, affected the way that I wrote, or who I thought about, or who I was writing for. It was very confusing for me.

I mentioned songwriting, art-making, as being a way to find a place for a feeling to exist, to build a home for it. In that way, the music is for me, but I also have never felt like I've entirely made music for myself. I think that I've always needed an audience, and for years, that made me feel really icky. It made me feel like an imposter a little bit, or not a true artist, because I'm like “Oh, if I'm not writing the music for me [alone], I'm an imposter.” It made me feel like a fake or something. But after a lot of thinking about it, I've really come full circle where I've realized that of course, the music is not [just] for me. I want to share it. The point of music, for me, really is to be in conversation with someone else, to share a feeling with someone else. And so I think it's okay to want, or to even need an audience. There's something beautiful about it. It's like, “This isn't for me.” It's partially for me, but it's my desire to be in community with these people.

It's my desire to share this feeling that I'm having—both a need to be seen and heard, and also a need to see and hear other people.

Something I'm curious about also is just, something that happens when we get in a capitalist mindset—a music industry mindset—of music is now a product for selling. We sell records, or we sell tickets, or we make money from streaming.

Gave me chills!

[laughs] It can quickly become a thing where we either can't see music as existing outside of those paradigms, or we don't just make time for it, because we're swept up in this, you know, machinery of album cycles, and promotion, and touring, and having to present this music, in this way, at this time, for this audience.

Absolutely. Recently, I did a singing retreat with a friend in Vermont. It was a group of 25 of us singing mostly traditional music together. We were just a group of people who decided that we wanted to sing together, and they've been doing this for years. I was a new person in the group. It really inspired me to see that when you're a person and you want to do something, or you're a group of people and you want to do something, all you have to do is decide that you're going to do it, and do it. You don't have to wait for an outside facilitator. You can just do it for yourself for free. You've just got to find the people who are interested in the things that you're interested in.

For the last seven months, I have been living on a farm in western Massachusetts, and I moved here from Philadelphia over the summer. Initially, I was WWOOFing, so I was trading my farm work, I was exchanging it for room and board, and meals. For five months or so I didn't really have any income, but I didn't really have any expenses either, because I just worked on the farm. I was fed and housed. I have to say that just emotionally, to not have a rent payment to make for a couple of months, even though I was working for my rent...It felt totally liberating. Even though I was working for it, and offsetting it, I was earning my stay, but to not have money exchanging hands, it was really liberating. That's the context that is shaping a lot of the ways that I'm thinking about music and art being commodified, and how I want to get away from that world.

We want things to be really easy. We want everything on our phone, but I think there's a cost involved there. I feel like this is all related to money and capitalism in the way of reduction of costs, and putting things out of sight, making things more convenient...It makes us value things less. My goal, I think, as a musician or just as a maker of things, is to help encourage people to really explore an object or recording as a devotional experience. To make things special, to make things that are handmade or just made with care. And, I think, regardless of what sort of medium I'm working in, I want things to always be made with a sense of humanity.

Kristine Leschper recommends:

Growing your own food: I started doing this in earnest this past year, and it has been profoundly rewarding. I moved to a small family farm for five months of intensive living and learning permaculture and old-world ways of building. I loved it so much that I haven't left. Once you have learned the difference between a raspberry, cold, packed in plastic, and a deeply ripe raspberry, warmed by the sun, nearly purple and falling off its vine, there is no going back. I also revel in the experience of harvesting potatoes, because unlike tomatoes or zucchini they perform their humble magic underground. There's the anticipation of what you might find—have the voles gotten to them? Were they planted deep enough to avoid the sun, which transforms them into something green and toxic? There's also the fact that you come across all sorts of life digging around in the dirt like that; it is difficult to feel lonely in a garden.

Scarlet runner beans: My favorite bean, they are between the size of a Pinto and a Lima, their color is a deep cool black with specks of lavender around their curved backs, where the dots and lines sort of elongate and run together—the pattern reminds me of water. They're hefty, their skin holds up even after a few hours in the pot, their center is creamy and reminds me of a roasted chestnut. My favorite way to cook them is to simmer a long time with plenty of olive oil, a whole head of garlic, tomato paste plus fresh oregano and a handful of salt. Lemon if you have it. Towards the end I add more salt and a glug of red wine vinegar, serve with a smattering of homemade breadcrumbs or toasted bread.

Les Blank documentaries: All of them, but a few standouts are *Gap-Toothed Women*, *Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers*, and *The Maestro: King Of The Cowboy Artists*. Watching these documentaries I can feel his generous gaze—how obvious it is that he loves these people, loves filming them, speaking to them, learning their idiosyncrasies and immortalizing them in a way, sharing them across time and space. They are intimate films, feeling more like poems, nothing like the cool distance you might expect of a documentary. There is a sense of celebration, a guarantee of festival, even (and especially) in the most ordinary exports of human relationships: food, music, dancing, laughter, art, community.

Singing with others: The voice is a special music-making device in its outright availability—we carry it everywhere we go, it feels like a kind of freedom. Few things bolster my spirit more than singing, and joining my voice with others enlarges that feeling tenfold. I recently attended a weekend of singing in Vermont, we were a ragtag group sharing folk songs, freedom songs, and spirituals. No one was individually responsible for the event, it was a collective effort, and we took turns teaching, leading, and facilitating. Some of my favorite moments were actually in between these scheduled sings, like when a few of us walked down to an icy stream and someone's voice began to rise, "As I went down to the river to pray..." and we all joined in.

All The Odes by Pablo Neruda: I am reading Neruda for the first time, starting with this collection of his

odes. Like in the Les Blank documentaries, this is a space where the quotidian triumphs—his words animate chairs, solitude, apples, poverty, the color green. No object is too big, too small, or too abstract to demand his unwavering attention. This is what I find beautiful about the ode as a lyrical form, the simplicity of this absolute commitment to a single object, to describe it as fully as possible in however many words necessary. The pacing of these poems is fantastic, very satisfying to read aloud, and so the collection has become a companion to me in moments of solitude when I am yearning for the music of a voice.

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Fact

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