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November 23, 2021 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2617 words.

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# On finding ways to keep going

Musician and writer Michelle Zauner (Japanese Breakfast) discusses the differences between writing a book and a record, being a late bloomer, and how DIY influenced her approach to her life and work.

**Books take a while to get published. Records take a while to get made. Had you planned to have both *Crying in H Mart* and *Jubilee* coming out in the same general timeframe, or it just happened that way?**

Oh my god. No, it's the worst. The record was supposed to come out in the summer of 2020, and then we were like, "Maybe it's not the best time to release an album about joy." I'm so glad we moved it. It used to be I was devastated for a number of petty, petty reasons I've come to terms with now, but it was not supposed to be like this. It's hard to know what it would be like if it hadn't been like that. It's better that it's like this.

**Has it been hard to divide your time between the two?**

It's hard to know how they would function without each other at this point. I think they're somewhat in conversation with one another. I have no anxiety about this album coming out, because I've just been so in book world, and I'm still really settling into that. It's hard to even wrap my head around. On top of that, the pandemic makes everything so bizarre. People keep asking, "How does it feel to have this success?" I haven't left my apartment, so it doesn't feel real to me at all. It's stuff you read online, and I feel somewhat disconnected from it. I also just keep busy.

**It's an ambitious record with a lot of people contributing to it. Writing a memoir, on the other hand, is a pretty solitary pursuit. Did the book feel collaborative at all?**

For sure. Writing a book is far less collaborative than my process of writing a record. I am really lucky, and I have Craig Hendrix, who is the drummer and has produced the last two albums. He's a big brother type, and I feel so comfortable with him. Our collaborative relationship is so fruitful. The publishing world feels a bit more formal [than the music world]. Even publishing emails are formal. Everyone is a really exceptional writer, there's like 10 different ways to say, "Good job." People will write you three paragraphs of, "I'm delighted." I don't know. It's so fanciful.

My book is so much better because of my editor. I made my husband read everything. Sometimes I would write a sentence and just be like, "What do you think?" I'm so needy in that way. It was definitely a much more insular process than writing an album.

**What has that been like to make something in quarantine? Did it change your process at all?**

The album was more or less done before the pandemic began. I think we'd mastered the record in February of 2020, and we did the album cover and all that. Then March, we were about to shoot our first music video. I remember our producer was coming from LA, and she was like, "So do you think that this pandemic is going to affect the shoot at all?" I was like, "I don't see why it has anything to do with us." We were going into lockdown, and I had to completely put the album on pause. I hate to give the pandemic anything, but I will say that it did give me more time to revise the book.

The final revision was mostly done in, I think, May. I think I submitted it in July of 2020. So, I probably would've been on tour, and it would've been harder for me to focus on some really important writing that got done at the tail end of the book. Beyond that, I think everyone felt creatively stifled during the pandemic, or at least I hope they did, because I certainly felt that way. I felt especially

stifled because I had just worked on these huge projects, and so when March 2020 came around, I was like, "I'm ready to live."

Then it was like, "No, actually, you're going to stay inside for a really long time." It felt like I couldn't write music until this record came out, and I couldn't write another book until I saw I didn't completely fuck this one up. I practiced a lot of piano and played a lot of Chess.com. I like indulgent hobbies.

**Did you really not work on any songs or any other writing?**

There's a third player in all of this, which is the soundtrack for this indie game called *Sable* that I worked on. I've spent a lot of focus months finishing that project and being even more involved than I anticipated. Things that I would have been a bit more spread thin on, I went in deeper with.

**In *Crying in H Mart*, you write about your early days as a musician. You did a lot yourself. For instance, you'd take photos, scan them into the computer, and use them as your early promo material. I've found coming from a DIY background to be helpful for so many reasons. There's the self-sufficiency. You can work alone. Did you find that skillset coming in handy during the pandemic?**

During Bandcamp Fridays, I had all this leftover tour merch. I spent a lot of time mailing orders and writing individual notes, which was nice, because I feel the way we've gotten to be a bigger band is just curiosity with how grand we can go. If things go to shit, because I've come up in this DIY way, there's a part of me that's like, "You're always going to be okay."

It was nice to go back to basics and write stationary for fans, because I love that kind of labor so much, that kind of busy labor of packaging stuff and counting shirts. I just love that shit. I would still do it if I had the capacity. I think that that's such an essential part of my narrative.

It took a really long time. I'm a late bloomer in this industry; I'm ancient in the music industry. Sometimes I get pissy about the young ones that came into it super early, but I'm also really glad I had some sort of later recognition, because I couldn't really appreciate it if it came earlier. It pushed me to work harder, because I knew it was such a rarity to come by. I had won a lottery, and I needed to run to catch up with it.

It's important for me that I know what everyone's doing and that they're essential and a good person. I used to do all my own press releases. I booked all my own tours. I did all my own merch. I tour managed, which was so much. But I'm so glad I did that, because I can appreciate what everyone does for us now.

**When you talk about the band, you say "we." You see it as a collective versus you being the band?**

I think of myself as the director of the project. I've toured with the same guys for three to five years. I've worked with the same video team since the beginning. For the most part, our press person, our booking agent, they're all the same people. It's a real family affair. It feels unfair to just say, "My project," because there's so many people that are involved, and I would not be able to have built what I built without them. I would never call this a solo project because there's so many people that have been involved with it and for such a long time.

**In the book, you talk about the band you had early on that never really took off. You were waiting for a few years, and it just didn't happen. Then one of the people in the band ends up getting another band, and you realize, "Oh, this is going to be their Fallon moment." People have this idea of the overnight success, where they think, "This person's suddenly huge" and don't realize all the work that went into it. Could you talk a bit to the perseverance it takes to reach a level of success?**

There's so much mythology around paying your dues and the struggle and band karma. In his case, that band was doing really well, and they never played Jimmy Fallon. They played Seth Myers. But I didn't blame him. He's our bass player now. What if that happens? Any moment, this could happen to us. We just don't know. We just have to keep putting in the work.

I've encountered that so many times. There was a point in which I felt like I had to let it go, but I love the grit. Especially when you're younger, it's really fun. I love wrapping cables. I love carrying amps into the venue. I love breaking down drums. I love the feeling of a hard day's work and the physical labor that goes into all of the aspects of being in a band. I'm a lifer. I really love that lifestyle. I always have, and I've definitely worked with a number of people who are just so ready for that to be over way too soon. I knew it was going to take a lot. It was worth it to me.

I have so many instances where I remember I played in a band with this girl, she didn't drive, and I hate driving, but I understand that it's a big part of the gig. She wanted to bring in this girl who didn't have her license, and I was like, "Listen, I'm not going to be the only one that drives the fucking car on tour. There's no way that two out of four of the people don't know how to drive." She was like, "We're about to open for Diiv. We'll be on a bus. We just have to open for Diiv."

That's a big thing that musicians think, like if you open for someone else at one show, suddenly you'll be on a tour. There are a lot of people who think that way. Also, I will say that there's a lot of musicians that aren't built for that kind of lifestyle. I know so many people who are like, "We just have to open for Tegan and Sara, and then we never have to work again." No.

I thought that on my own when I was in my teens. I was like, "If I just write one time for the Village Voice, I've made it." Then I wrote for the Village Voice and got my \$75 that took six months to come.

It's helpful to be of the mindset of really low expectations. Then everything else is a nice surprise when it happens.

**How do you avoid burning out when you're juggling the different parts of running a band? Are there any things you do when you're touring to kind of maintain your sanity and health?**

I just really love what I do. So it is pretty easy. Part of it is I've worked a nine to five job. I've worked a lot of jobs that I hated. I know the alternative, and that keeps me motivated, because I like actively engaging with my mind in this way. Maybe that's a really lame answer, but I know what it's like to sit at a desk from nine to seven. I know this is so much better than that. I never thought it was possible to have a band that you don't hate in some way. I've had such a long time in the industry, I've put together a really wonderful band that is very much a family to me. We all get along very well, and our personalities are complementary. We've all learned what everyone needs and are out of each other's hair when we can sense it's time to do that. That's helpful.

I also delight in nerdy regimen. I'm most excited to be on a bus to refrigerate the berries. Or, "Oh, I can't wait to put spring mix on our rider and have salads every day." I like efficiency. I'm also in my thirties, and I'm into taking care of myself so I can function.

A huge part of it is that my husband is in the band, and I think if he wasn't in the band, I would be so miserable. It makes it just easier to be on tour all the time. I remember being on tour for the first two years when he wasn't in the band and being so lonely and miserable and, yeah, just completely eliminating that work-personal divide has helped me.

Something that's been interesting throughout your responses is the idea that this is a part of your life, that you found time to do it even when it wasn't what you did full-time. That's an important part of maintaining a creative existence. For me, it's like, yeah, I worked the gas station midnight shift. I worked on a blueberry farm. I know what it looks like not to have this thing, and I know how easily it could have just been that thing. When you have that mindset, you find joy in the little things, like getting the berries refrigerated, doing all those things that feel very satisfying. It's that optimistic view of making work and making art. We were talking about how DIY leads to a kind of creative sustainability. You learn how to do things on your own, and how to keep going. So, for instance, when the pandemic hit, you kept making things. It didn't deter you.

I was thinking, too: My mother died of pancreatic cancer. When she did, I mourned, yes, but I also kept making things; somehow her death made me see things in a new, deeper way and so instead of falling apart, or getting stuck, I found myself doing more than ever. I was thinking about your mother's death, and the grief it caused, but also all the beautiful work it inspired. We were talking about optimism. DIY can lead to a kind of optimism—you're hit with something terrible, but you find a way to keep going. How important was your background in punk, punk houses, DIY, etc., in knowing how to keep going in the face of tragedy?

This is a beautiful idea. I think part of it is with DIY you have literally nothing and your spirit and ambition and resourcefulness just finds a way to make it work. Venues won't book you? Rent a generator and stage a show under a bridge and text all the punks you know. Booking agents won't give you the time of day? Book yourself a tour across the country using Bandcamp to find bands in every city and pay it forward when they come to yours. I think when your life and family gets obliterated, in some ways that sort of resourcefulness comes in handy. Make a space and project to anchor yourself and give yourself what you need. I also think my background in punk and DIY provided me with a family and a sense of community. So in many ways, my new family is a chosen family of musicians I've banded together to love and protect me.

Michelle Zauner recommends:

5 pieces of studio gear/plugin ins that inspired the record:

Spitfire Albion one

Arturia fairlight CMI

Arturia Yamaha CS 80

Native instruments Maschine

Fender Rhodes

Name

Michelle Zauner

Vocation

Musician and writer


Fact

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