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As told to J. Bennett, 2903 words.

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On putting your energy into what matters to you

Musician and dialogue editor Kira Roessler (Black Flag) on folding your personal experiences into your work, the value of competition, and being influenced by the people around you.

Piano was your first instrument. Did you find that having that foundation made it easier to pick up the bass later?

I believe piano is a great first instrument for a kid. It makes so much sense: one button is one note, and it's all laid out in front of you. I think it's much more intuitive than other instruments, when a kid's just starting. I started when I was six years old and played classical piano until I was 11, so when I moved on to bass I had some music background, some sense of music. But, of course, bass is very different. It's a very physical instrument, so it took a while to get with the physical aspect of the bass. But I sometimes wonder, because I am left-handed, whether the bass made sense to me because the bass lines are on the left hand of the piano.

What drew you to the bass?

My brother Paul had this progressive rock band and their bass player quit. I always tagged along behind my brother, so I was like, "Well, I'll learn the bass." I practiced really hard just to get into his band, but I was never good enough to join. Then he got into punk, so our first band together was a punk rock band. But at first it was very much that there was this niche, and then I immediately just got into it as an instrument.

Your brother Paul was in a lot of bands, including the Screamers, one of L.A.'s first punk bands. Do you think that having an older sibling leading the way affected your outlook on music and creativity?

Completely. I quit piano because I was so competitive and he was older than me and better than me and I couldn't stand the competition. I started bass because of Paul. I got into punk rock because of Paul. So I've always sort of been a tagalong to his interests and found that his unwavering focus on music has particularly helped me in many ways.

For one thing, his decision to sort of follow the "starving artist" thing influenced me to not go in that direction. I decided I would work for a living because music was too hard to try to earn a living at. I mean, I was willing to try, but I was going to have a backup plan. That was part of my focus on staying in college, whereas he studied music in college for a year and then quit to go on tour with the Screamers. So he influenced me all the way.

Do you think your competitive nature has been beneficial to you overall? Has it also been detrimental?

My competitiveness is definitely a negative. I struggle with not just letting things be the way they are, and I've definitely gotten riled up in a way that was just unproductive. But in terms of my drive, obviously there's an element of keeping up that drives one to get bigger, stronger, faster-whatever—that is a driving force.

Your brother also co-produced your new solo album. Given the fact that you have this decades-long musical history with him, what do you see as the pros and cons of working with family?

Well, we are very, very close these days. But you always have that dynamic, right? I'm the little sister; he's the big brother that made me often feel not good enough. But then we came to a point—and I was trying to put my finger on this—I think it was when I went in and recorded something with him for a band called Awkward with another bass player, Devin Hoff. I think that was the first time that Paul was able to sort of separate himself a little from me as little sister.

The music was really intense and complicated, and I think he was a little impressed because I've always been the sort of hobbyist, and he is the professional musician. So, I think that his competitiveness allowed him to let me be a little behind in terms of my artistic temperament. But in the last 15 years or so it started to become something where my creativity and me bringing songs to him, and him working through his creative way to support me—as opposed to combat me—has really evolved.

And now it's become this way of interacting where he will suggest additions and I will play editor and add things and take things away. He tends to do music that is very lush and full, and I tend to do much more sparse music, so we act as a very good sounding board to each other. He'll suggest things and I'll pick and choose what I think works in terms of the sparse emotions that are felt in my kind of music. It took him a long time to get it, but he seems to have really embraced my sensibility when it comes to my songs.

He respects that you're the songwriter.

Yes. To me, music isn't a democracy, really. The songwriter gets to decide. For a lot of the bands I played with, I was not the songwriter, so then I tried to do what was best in their minds. But as the songwriter in my solo stuff, I make the decisions. And he has gotten really good at being a great addition while letting me define what I'm looking for.

Kira is your first solo album. Given that so much of your past musical work has been collaborative, was making a solo album about taking a step away from the band scenario?

Well, it's still collaborative. But look, I've been writing songs in my room for many, many years, and I've been sending songs to others to collaborate with them virtually for many years, and I was never really drawn to the idea of necessarily putting out records. There's a lot of songs that I've just worked on to express my feelings, to process my life, and there wasn't really a drive to release it. It was just a drive to create music. And then Paul said that the label wanted to put out a solo record. I turned 60 this year, so I thought, well—this is a good time to do that.

I had never felt like I really wanted to stick my neck out and see what people would think of my weird little music thing because it's so personal. It's so naked, and it's not written or played in a way to necessarily draw in big numbers of fans. It's something that I just didn't know if anyone would really connect to. But he asked, and it was the right time, and this set of songs tells a story that was starting to reach its logical conclusion, so in that way I was able to pick this set of songs as a nice package for the record. I couldn't have done this story any earlier.

Tell me about the story.

The first song was probably written about 13 years ago, and it's a story of love and loss, basically. I had to go through the loss and the aftermath of the loss to really be able to have enough distance from it to let it be told to the world at large... am I being too cryptic?

No, that's okay. I don't think we need to demystify it. We're talking about music here.

Yeah. I think the emotions are universal, and that's kind of why I stuck with this concept of love and loss. These are the things that we all, as human beings, hopefully can connect to in some way. And that's the point of music, right? To make somebody feel something.

Absolutely. Because it's your first solo album, were there any hurdles to overcome as far as teaching yourself to do certain things or just having the courage to push yourself into new territory?

The difficulty for me was the visual aspect—putting together some sort of cover for the record, and then when we tackled the concept of making a video. I'm very much an audio person, so it was definitely the visual stuff that was challenging. When you're working with others and their ideas, you can flesh things out together, and this time I really felt like I had to create something visually—and that was new to me. What I found was that it's very much like songwriting. You start with a little seed, a little idea, and it takes on a life of its own.

You've been making music for a long time now. Do you feel like there's anything that ties all your work together, even if it's just the attitude behind it?

Yeah. For me, bringing it into my very personal experience and telling my story is hugely important. I'm not really interested in writing about something outside of me that might be super interesting but that I don't have as much of an emotional connection to. As I say, to me music is about connecting emotionally, so if the song doesn't start to connect in a really personal way and I'm not getting the hang of how to express that, then it's not working. So my philosophy is to get to the root of the emotion and strip away anything that's going to let you off the hook. Stay in it, lean into it.

You played your first live show at the Whisky in Los Angeles when you were just 16. How did you feel beforehand, and how did you feel after?

Gosh, that was a long time ago. I'm certain I was nervous. I mean, I've always gotten nervous going onstage so I'm certain that I was terrified. And I'm certain I was relieved afterwards, because this first band that I was in, we didn't know what punk rock was. We were putting on an act of what we *thought* punk rock was. And the couple of songs that I had written that I was screaming into the microphone were just trying to be shock value and trying to be punk rock without really coming from inside of what that meant.

I probably felt even more nervous putting on this act with these guys, who were my brother and his friends, so they were all older and they all seemed more confident. The guitar player, who played on my new record, he played my first gig with me—that's how far back we go—he'd been playing guitar for years and was very sort of relaxed about the actual playing aspect, whereas for me bass was still a struggle physically. So it was just overwhelming and difficult, but I'm not shy about taking on challenges, so being competitive I had to keep up. There was never any question I wouldn't do it.

You mentioned that your brother got you into punk rock. What do you think it was about punk that spoke to you?

My brother had friends he'd gone to high school with before punk rock, so he was led into it through people he knew, and I was led into it by following along with Paul. But what struck me at the first gig I went to—the Germs at the Whisky a Go Go—was that the rage and anger that gets expressed in punk rock is something that soothes me in a weird way. I think it's what started my love affair with emotional content and connecting to base emotions.

I was also drawn to the fact that these people were very anti-society at large, if you will. It was very underground, and I always felt like a total outsider. I was a tomboy, and frankly, I didn't even feel part of punk rock. I felt like an outsider there, too. But it was okay to be a misfit among the misfits, you know? So that was definitely part of the attraction. These people weren't comfortable living in the world, and that made sense to me. They were angry and hostile and had found a way to actually express that and put that across and let me share it with them.

Black Flag were your favorite band before you even joined. What drew you to them specifically?

Well, I saw all the incarnations. I saw them at the Whisky a Go Go when they were a five piece. Henry [Rollins] had come back and started singing with them and Dez [Cadena] was playing guitar, and Chuck Biscuits was on the drums. And that show just floored me. Henry's ability to communicate those emotions in the songs seemed like it had raised the level of intensity. It raised the level of emotion, like I could feel it coming through his voice in a way that was even more so than before and more than the other [previous Black Flag vocalists]. I just was so taken by the power that they had, and their ability to channel it into my brain. I knew their work ethic, that they were touring so much, and these guys were just all in on the band while a lot of people were just doing bands as a hobby. So it appealed to me on a bunch of levels.

When you were asked to join, you were replacing a founding member, Chuck Dukowski. Was that awkward?

It was very awkward. But again, it not being a democracy, none of it was up to me. The decision had been made: Chuck was out of the band. This is what was presented to me when Henry called me. "Chuck's out of the band, you should go jam with Greg [Ginn] and Bill [Stevenson]." It was presented as a fait accompli, and that made it so that I didn't feel like I was taking away someone's boyfriend or something, you know? But it was huge shoes to fill. I mean, this was literally my favorite band and Chuck is a huge part of that. As a songwriter, he absolutely captures the rage and the anger as well as anyone I know.

So yeah, it was terrifying, and I was physically terrified of being strong enough to do what I knew I was going to have to do. Being asked to join your favorite band, of course it was exciting and I was thrilled. But at the same time, I was intimidated and wasn't sure I was going to be able to do it. But again, my competitive instincts kicked in, and I could show no weakness—ever.

You were a student at UCLA during your tenure in Black Flag. How did you find that tour/school balance?

Having watched my brother quit college and making the decision that I wasn't going to do the same thing, what I told them was, "Look, I'll take quarters off at UCLA to tour and stuff—I get that we have to do that. But I'm three years into a four-year degree. I am going to finish." So, we talked about working a schedule out where there would be touring time and there would be times when we were at home and that's when I would be at school. But it didn't work out great. We ended up doing a winter tour in 1984 and freezing our equipment solid and practically dying in the cold. But I had made a commitment to myself and all the work I had put in.

Black Flag famously did long, grueling tours. What was that experience like for you?

Absolutely. I knew they did when I joined, but it's different knowing it intellectually and actually going through it. I mean, you cannot imagine the level of physical demand that that schedule takes. Even if you could sleep eight hours a night in a comfortable bed, which of course ever happened, it would be hard. But then to add the sort of physical labor to maybe four hours of sleep and probably not a lot of showers, plus sleeping on floors or in the van and all of these things, it's just a mental and physical challenge that's really hard to imagine unless you walk through it.

I think everyone learns something about themselves on their first tour. What did you discover about yourself?

Well, certainly that competitive, "I'm not going to show any weakness," side helped me shut up during the times when it was just so bad I didn't think I could make it—but I could never admit that because of my competitive drive. So what I learned about myself is that I can do whatever I set my mind to. The question just becomes like you said earlier: How do you balance your life? Figure out what is it you really want out of life, and give that every single bit of your energy, because wasted energy is truly your worst enemy. So it did help me focus something that was already starting to take shape, which is why I got my Black Flag tattoo. To me, it means whatever you do, do it all the way.

Kira Roessler recommends:

My Favorite Murder (podcast)

The Evens - *Get Evens* (album)

After the Fall by Noah Cawley (book)

The Morning Show (TV)

The Zoo (TV)

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