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As told to Margaret Farrell, 3246 words.

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# On showing up and doing the work

Musician and visual artist Emma Ruth Rundle discusses creating an approachable schedule, setting digestible goals, and how human flaws create emotional and authentic connections in art.

**Your latest album Engine of Hell began when you were staying in Wales. Why that location?**

I'd been working with [the band] Thou. I had been touring with my band; we did like a pretty hardcore couple of years to support the last record. I was like, "I need some alone time. I need some time to be totally isolated," not knowing what was coming. While I don't believe that going to an exotic destination is the way that people need to write records or that that is a holy grail for creativity, I'm a firm believer in showing up every day to do your practice.

But doing that kind of thing can be a nice reset. For me, I needed a nervous system reset. I needed to clear the debris of touring away and remove myself from my relationship. I've stayed over on tours [in the UK] and that's been a nice place where I found some peace. Walking along the ocean, it's very dramatic and beautiful. And in the winter time, there aren't a lot of tourists. So you just get this epic landscape to enjoy the sort of feeling that you're like the only person alive in this wilderness, which I love.

So I needed to distance myself from some things and I didn't feel that I was able to show up and do my regular art practice or writing practice without this massive reset.

**You've talked about being a really disciplined person. How did you develop that instinct?**

Over time, but also early on. I've read a lot of books about self-help and creativity. There is a constant message and theme in a lot of the work that it's important to re-spark your creative side. I love The Artist's Way.

For me, because I don't want to speak about anybody else, if I do what I want to do, I will watch movies or Rupaul's Drag Race for three weeks straight and not do anything at all. I won't feed myself. I'll lay here doing that. Setting goals and establishing some discipline is so key to accomplishing things creatively. I find that for me, since I do a lot of different things like the visual art stuff and the music stuff, and even within the music stuff, organizing things into projects, and then within those projects, setting deadlines is also really important for me. Committing to "Okay, well I know that I'm going to start writing a solo record," so you book the studio time and that's your deadline. It's easy to implement structure from there to say this is my job now so I wake up and I'm responsible. There's a consequence, if you don't. No one's gonna write my music for me; no one's gonna paint my paintings for me.

Inspiration is great, but you must show up to your practice. That was something that was really clear in a lot of the books I had read. I have huge times in my life that are creative dead spaces, and it's really troubling and frightening. That's when I have turned to those types of books. I think there's this message of "You have to show up and treat it like a job," and I do believe that that's true.

**In regard to Engine of Hell, there's this throughline of revisiting childhood trauma and past grief. When you're treating creativity like a job, and there's subjects from years ago that you want to revisit from your childhood or whatever part of your past, how do you recognize that it's the right time to bring it into your creative space?**

At some point, it became clear that that was part of the objective of this record. And I think because my subject is often very close to pain or trauma, that's kind of what my subject is. That's another reason why it's important to have a structure. You need to go in and spend some time focusing on this with intention. Otherwise, I have an instinct to numb out, whether it's through drugs and alcohol, or watching

Rupaul's Drag Race, whatever, I don't want to be present for that.

I had come at it from a production standpoint, initially of what I wanted it aesthetically to be like—very bare, very stripped down. Then the content of what it would be started to reveal itself. I also tend to feel that projects have a spirit in a way. They want to become something. This wanted to be this thing and getting out of the way of that or accepting it on the other hand, realizing this was becoming what it was. It became important how I approached investigating this stuff.

Doing this kind of art always has some kind of purpose for me in my personal life—how it's going to serve me and my evolution as a person, or where it's going to take me whether that means like with this full band touring around the world, and that's what I need to do for myself, or if it's this record, which is where I needed to reestablish who I was not for other people, but for myself, the context of my existence. Where did I come from? What are some of the key events that set me into this behavioral pattern? I got sober, while I was making this record, and that was also about pulling away those numbing coping mechanisms and facing the darkness and going like, what is this about? Who is this dark friend that's just constantly manipulating my behavior? And being disciplined about investigating that, because it's nice to have a time where you can stop having to look at it.

Typically, my thing is, I will wake up and go straight to work on it like. And then later, if I could approach it again, I would. But it's nice to be able to say, "Okay, I've done that," and I don't have to live in that intensity constantly.

**When you're creating do you find that it's therapeutic or cathartic?**

With this particular thing, Yes. I had become sort of numbed out and lost a little, and was actively trying to unburden myself, take away some of the armor that I built up and figure out what I was actually feeling. Even since the record has been finished, and I got to that over there—I did that work of making the music, writing the songs, investigating the history—having it be a finished thing, making the videos that I've made that go with it, really to tell the story and feel that it exists in a very complete form outside of myself is very cathartic.

In the process of making that record, I don't even think when I was recording it I understood how life-changing it was. There's some element of this process that's a soul retrieval. Where did that piece go? Where did it come from? Let's find it and pull it back in. Even if it's not the most pleasant thing to think about. It enables you to go like "Okay, well, this is what it is. And then this is the path to move forward. These are the things that I need to do to actually make work and change my life." If you don't know what you're dealing with, how are you going to negotiate change? I think it's been a long time of pulling darkness around myself so I didn't have to think about it.

**Has that always been the case in the past when you put out art? It feels like a step forward for your own personal growth?**

With the record, *Marked for Death*, it was a little bit that way, but this one is much more intense and surgical. I think with my work in general, I'm always kind of exploring. There's some kind of quality of, Why? What is it? What are these feelings? In some of the past stuff, there's music that's more digestible and more enjoyable to play. Whereas this is not that at all. This is not about anything other than, the stark, lyrical content is really the main focus of it.

By making art or by looking at some of my compositions visually, it can describe a state of mind or a feeling or a sense of being that I can't express with just words. I'm not a writer, and I don't consider myself very good at articulating things necessarily in conversation. The reason I make art is because it conveys that stuff that I'm trying to figure out. It allows me to reexamine it. So once the piece is done, by looking at it, I gain more understanding about it, and about myself. One reason why I love looking at other people's art or listening to it, it can help you snap the pieces into place of your own experience—organizing the chaos.

**Were there moments where you didn't want to face whatever chaos was bubbling up or the dark acquaintance?**

Oh, yeah, every day. [laughs]

**What is the conversation you have in your head or a ritual or something that pushes you through the process?**

There's one thing that's relying on the simplicity of a rule that you set for yourself. It's like, "Go out for an hour and work on that song." And I go, "Okay, I can do that. I can do an hour of that." The other thing I remember is, there's a voice in me that goes "Yeah, I don't want to do that. I want to cancel all my day." There's some voice that's like, "No, you can't do that." It's anxiety that's horrible and crushing, and tells you to not do stuff. And I've gotten old enough, and experienced it enough to know that if you do something directly opposed to what that specific energy is telling you, you will feel better.

That's the kind of self work that's difficult. That's actually self-care. I used to think self-care was about taking a bath or whatever. But it's going out to meet someone that you said you would meet even though that voice inside you is like, "you're probably going to die if you go outside." I mean, that's been more real in recent times, but I've kind of had this feeling my whole life. When that thing is telling me to not go work on music, to not focus on my art, while it might feel good in the short term to

give into that—I do think it’s important to know when you need rest—ultimately, I know that by doing something directly opposed to that voice, by doing the thing it doesn’t want me to do, I will almost always feel better.

I think this probably happens to other artists where you’re gaslighting yourself constantly. So it’s important to have some key principal truths that there’s no way to reason out of. That simple rule of: If you have a deadline coming up, go to your desk and work for an hour because that’s doable. What you can think of that as digestible, whereas if you were to say to yourself, “Alright, eight hours a day for five days a week on my process,” for me, that’s like too big a chunk of time that I’ll just go, “No, I can’t do it.” Reminding yourself that whatever that voice is, it’s always going to try to trick you, but you have to just do the opposite of what it says. Then having practices that are doable and digestible.

**Do you notice the tone between the voice that tells you you need to rest versus the voice that is trying to trick you? Are they different voices?**

No, sometimes they’re not. Which is hard, because I think it’s easy that one day of rest can very quickly become a week of not having accomplished anything. That’s why I do think deadlines are important because then you can’t spiral out into nothingness.

Yesterday I had a really hard day. I was just crying a lot and had kind of a nervous breakdown. And today I was like, “Oh my god, I’m relapsing in my depression in a really dark way.” And another voice was like, “Let’s just be let’s look at this in an objective way. Let’s take away the emotional reactions to everything and look at what’s just happened.” This is going on, you’ve been to four doctor’s appointments in the last two days; you spent eight hours on interviews with people on the phone. I have chronic pain in my legs at the moment, which is fine, I’m working on it. But I had to look at things in an objective list and go, “Okay, I didn’t have a nervous breakdown out of nowhere, because I’m relapsing into depression for no reason.” There are real things that are happening that have led me to a point of exhaustion and emotional fatigue. That’s totally okay, and also it will pass. So what I can do for myself is eat food. [laughs] Even though my legs hurt, I can still make myself go on a walk. And I can still watch *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

That’s the highest point of what my being is able to do is to try to stop, drop and roll with emotional reactions to things and break them into facts, which is also the approach to the creative process and practice, right? Take away the emotion. Like, “One hour, I can do that.” Put aside my reactions for a second and step up to that. That kind of analytical thinking about things is something I find very helpful, but I’ve had to learn how to do it. My natural state is total chaos in my mind. If I don’t feel good one day, it’s the end of the world. So I’ve had to learn how to think about things in a more removed sense. And then tell myself that stuff.

**Engine of Hell, which is intentionally different sounding from your previous work, was also captured in live takes. I read that you had to pick between ones that captured the emotion you were going for versus ones that were more lyrically or instrumentally accurate. What are your thoughts on dealing with imperfections and accepting flaws?**

The idea and the motivation for wanting to capture imperfections and going for a take that has the best emotional quality where there are technical flaws—singing out of tune, instrument out of tune, fucking up a lyric, playing it wrong. You cannot write that stuff into music and have it be authentic. It happens. And that’s a magic thing about being human.

It was so important for this record and making the record effective emotionally, for me as a listener, when I hear that in other music, live, or on certain albums where the album was recorded in that way, it immediately connects me to the person and that this is a human being having a moment in time. It makes it very real and humanizing. It’s lightning straight to my heart, and it disarms me completely.

It’s easy to dehumanize. With how the media is now, we look at people through social media or on the TV or whatever, and even now, more so with the lack of gathering and all that stuff. We don’t necessarily think of the depth of the character of these people and their lives and their experiences and how they’re a friend or a family member in the way you take their everything about them into consideration when you hear them say something to you. Hearing that on a recording like that Sibylle Baier record *Colour Green*. When I hear her little nuanced moments—this is a woman in time, in a room with a life revealing this part of herself. It moves me. It unlocks all this feeling and I don’t have this wall. There’s a depth to the character. There’s a depth to the experience. And there’s a connection that takes place.

So I wanted that in this music because of the nature of the content and taking away all the effects, the goal was to have very direct delivery, and that to connect with the listener and in a disarming way, it would be important to show flaw; it would be important to be very humanized. It’s not meant to be executed perfectly because there’s nothing about human experience that’s perfect. There’s nothing about the stories on this record or the memories of it that are perfect at all. I wanted there to be a level of honesty in it that revealed it as it is. It’s a warts-and-all approach because life is messy.

Emma Ruth Rundle Recommends:

*Here are my five things to spark or maintain creativity. Especially good for times when it’s difficult or finding it hard to make work.*

Spend 5 to 10 minutes of your morning writing down what you can remember about your dreams from the night

before.

Write down five things for which you are grateful. Can be simple or profound. For example I usually include oatmeal on my list and the relationship I have with my sister. It's not against the rules to repeat things on your list from day today but I try to include current interactions or observations. For example... I am grateful for the kind conversation I had with the person at the market yesterday. Another example—I am grateful for the color on the leaf that fell outside my window this afternoon. Go to town.

Mindfulness walk or outdoor time. I take a walk every single day but I realize this isn't possible for everyone for a number of reasons but the combination of light exercise with time outside my living space is helpful for fighting off stagnation and sadness. A modification of this could be to sit in a chair and open a window then take in the air for a few minutes while moving your arms around to music.

Set small, digestible goals for yourself. Only you can know what that means. And it changes from day to day. Some days I know that I can't do as much as other days but having a deadline can also help. That way I can set realistic goals overtime that lead to the desired outcome. I like to reward myself for doing these things. "I will practice my instrument for 1 hour today," "I will paint this two inch section of eyeballs on this canvas today," and "I can watch my favorite show/ or go have a nice coffee" once I'm done. I have to treat myself a little like a child sometimes in order to make work. This isn't always possible but it can help.

Find new things and force exposure. For example, it's uncomfortable to listen to new music but it can be good for my brain station. The library has free books. Sometimes it fun to just go there to look in an unexpected section and check out a book on woodworking. Learn how to Vogue from a YouTube video. Access can be an issue in some places for sure but take advantage of anything around.

Name

Emma Ruth Rundle

Vocation

musician, visual artist


Fact


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Emma Wondra

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