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As told to Lauren Spear, 2766 words.

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On shifting your mindset through your creative work

Musician Angie McMahon discusses showing yourself kindness, stepping outside of your comfort zone, and being honest in what you make.

You released an album toward the end of 2023. How is it feeling to have it out in the world?

It's quite a big relief. It took me a long time to make this record so it felt like a really big climb to get it to the release. By the end of it, I was really proud of it, but I'd gone through so many different seasons of feelings with it that it was nice to not have to think about it in the same way anymore. All the decisions have been made and I can't change anything about it now and it is fully out of my hands.

I am hoping that my brain becomes creatively open again because I had tunnel vision when making the record. It hasn't happened yet, but when it does, it will feel good. I haven't had any negative feedback, which might just mean that it hasn't reached me, but I'm really just relieved at how it's been received so far. It feels surprisingly nice.

This album feels like an ongoing conversation with yourself. Based on the lyrics in "Divine Fault Line," "Letting Go," and "Saturn Returning" it sounds like you moved through a lot of pain and are now self-soothing. Does that resonate with you?

Yeah, that's 100% it. In the writing process I was trying to physically manifest lightness in my body as a kind of exercise. During a specific hard period of my life, I was so dysregulated. At this time, I didn't know anything about my nervous system or my subconscious mind and I was learning about the power of those things and how important it is to understand them. I used the songs as a way to kind of rewire myself. I just needed to get out of this dark place and I also needed to make a record, so those things were married together. It wasn't really what I expected the record to be, but that is what it ended up being. I was trying to be really nice to myself.

That definitely translates. It comes across as a very hopeful album.

Thanks so much, that means a lot. I had a big meltdown after recording it in the vein of, "What if no one wants to hear this? No one needs to hear me soothing myself." I had a big creative fear moment around it, but it didn't matter in the end because it was what I needed.

During the time the album was written, I was reading a book about how our subconscious brain is quietly feeding negative words to us. It was a self-help book technically and in it the author urges the reader to tune into this inner narration. I started doing it and became so overwhelmed by how often something negative was going on in my head. I used to really just write myself around in circles and then feel better afterwards. At this time, I was so deeply lost. I felt like I was at the rock bottom, and so my regular writing pattern wasn't going to work. I was like, "I can't stand it here. I can't stay here."

Learning that was a big influence on some of the songwriting because I realized that I wanted to plant something else in my brain and bring it into the conscious world and be in my body. I hadn't thought about songwriting that way before so it was unfamiliar territory. In the past, I would process the sad thing and write about exactly what was happening. This shift was different because I was trying to conjure something new.

Is there a push and pull between writing for yourself and writing for others?

I think on some level but it doesn't drive decision-making. There's some songs like "Letting Go" where I wanted to create an energy that met the message of the song. I considered the audience experience when I decided on what the BPM would be and what the rhythm sections would do. I definitely pictured what performing the song on stage would be like energetically.

I think what I'm struggling with is my own opinion of myself. It's so hard to know what an audience is going to think or what anyone else is going to think so I'm trying not to be conscious of it because it feels made up. The worst thought that someone could have would only affect me if it was something that I also believed about myself. It always just seems to come back to self-worth anyway.

One of my favorite songs on the album is called "Fish." In this song, you say "I was squeezing your self-esteem like dirt coming outta your skin." I feel like some songwriters have a tendency to paint themselves in a good light whereas this song seems very honest. I'm wondering what you decide to keep in a song and what you keep for yourself?

I think it's one of my favorites on the record as well. In regards to what I would filter out, I guess anything that feels like it might do harm to someone else and also to myself. In my experience so far, looking honestly at myself has not caused harm. It's almost the opposite—denying mistakes or bad decisions or toxic behaviors is what causes more harm. In that song, for whatever reason, it just came easy. It doesn't always come easy.

I was trying to be brave and have respect for my growth. I wanted the people around me to look gently, but honestly and be like, "What kind of decisions have you been making lately?" To make changes, I had to name them. It relates to this wider thing that I was going through over the past couple of years. I was reading a lot about Buddhism and came across this idea about hopelessness and defeat and how important it is to accept that your mindset isn't working and just get completely fed up with it. I found this really important because it stopped giving me a place to hide. In experiencing total acceptance, I was like, "This is how I am, and this is how things are right now. It's painful and it's uncomfortable." That became my way through and I found things becoming less painful. In the song, and in the record generally as well, I made this goal to be honest and then let that be a relief.

I really love this topic of rules that you have for yourself. I know some songwriters won't include signifiers of modern time in their lyrics, but you mention Fireball Whiskey and The Walking Dead in a couple of your songs. Can you tell me about that choice?

I almost wish I was better at writing about modern time. I find it a little bit jarring sometimes in my own writing if there's too much of it and so when there is a window to insert it, I get excited. I'm like, "Oh, that'll fit there, because there's all this other poetry around it." It's fun and feels real. I guess it just comes back to the honesty thing, it feels more authentic. I have tried to be a super poetic songwriter before, and it just sounds so fake and it doesn't really work for me. Those things are my anchors in reality and reminders that I'm in the present. I don't try to pretend otherwise. There are songs and artists that I love who would never drop *The Walking Dead* in a song. For me, I am at risk of taking myself too seriously sometimes or taking the job too seriously, so I feel like humor adds lightness.

What is your relationship with truth in songwriting?

Have you listened to the podcast *Broken Record*? There is one episode where they interview Mary Gauthier and she says something like, "you know in your body when the song is true and that doesn't mean that it is word for word exactly what happened. It doesn't need to be full reality, it could be 100% fiction, but if there's a true feeling then it's true." Sometimes truth means following the flow of the song or the idea that wants to be born. I think the beauty of the job is you get to craft an idea. I don't know if I could confidently say that my songs are 100% true either, but if they fulfill the intention to open myself up more or touch my fear then they are true to me.

Do you subscribe to the idea that some songs are already written and that you just have to coax them out of wherever they are waiting?

I would like to because that would probably make things easier. I've definitely felt a song tumbling over itself and I don't know if that's just because some ideas come more formed. So maybe I do subscribe to that idea, but not all the time. I think that would be too easy.

Over the course of this conversation, you've mentioned being inspired by various texts and people. Do you feel like you glean song ideas through other writers?

I think I'm always collecting, in large part to try and find understanding for myself. It doesn't necessarily always feel like it's about songwriting, a lot of the time it feels like I'm trying to find emotional understanding and answers about life. The songwriting is parallel to that and those things tend to live in the songs as well. I definitely go through seasons where I am writing very consistently and then, in the other seasons, I'm gathering my seeds.

I think what I realized when I had a second record looming and a life crisis happening at the same time was that I didn't know enough about the nature of fear, or the nature of the body and the mind. I became really interested in psychology and that really did inform this body of work. Part of my goal has become

to be really self-compassionate. Being a songwriter and an artist sometimes can come with so much self-loathing and shame. The way that I try to be really gentle with myself and my thinking, is to remind myself that everything is feeding the songwriting. Everything I do throughout the day is going to inform that purpose that I have and it's going to show up in my art. That's become really important—to be open to just sitting and reading a book, and walking, and relaxing into life. I try to think about it all as being related to the songwriting, because it helps me not be really mean to myself.

How do you find separation between your private life and your songwriting?

It probably comes back to the idea of trying not to cause harm and recognizing that a lot of my pain has to do with my own shit. I feel like in my experience when those things have overlapped and caused upset in my personal life, it is because of being too candid in the public forum of the art, without considering whether I would put that into a conversation in a public place, like a private group of people. I think I've learned from that. There were some songs that I wrote for this record that I didn't put on, because I knew that they were just too personal. I'm trying to just rise to the challenge of that, rather than be disappointed by it. I can take a song that is personal and rewrite it so it doesn't cause pain to someone else. It's been an interesting journey.

I'm also trying to practice not assigning blame to people in songs. When I was a younger songwriter, I would do it that much easier. Now, it's a little bit more challenging because I want to be honest about when people cause pain, but also recognize that a lot of our pain has to do with our own shit. Even if you're not writing from a blame space, I think it's important to remember that it could be really painful for someone else if you were to start singing it to however many people while you promote your record. Sometimes it is necessary to upset the system and piss people off, it's an important part of activism obviously, but at least with the content of these songs I didn't want to hurt people close to me just because I was hurting.

I don't think a lot of people think about the ethics of songwriting. There is power in being able to say your point of view, take the microphone and be like, "This is the version of the story." It becomes an uneven power dynamic when the other side isn't given that same platform. It's nice to hear you consider that, because I know for a fact it's not always considered.

Yeah, you're right. You're in a position of power and that's a beautiful thing and also something to be intentional about. I don't want to be insolent about it and be like, "Oh, well I have every right. Me, this white woman, to say whatever the fuck I want, because I'm an artist." That's bullshit. I don't think I've nailed it or anything, but I am trying to be intentional. When someone else has a narrative that feels so different from your own, I guess that's just life. We all have our different versions of events, but if I'm going to go real hardcore on a certain narrative about something, it better be balanced. I aim to be understanding about the fact that everyone is human, and not be so arrogant as to think, "Oh, just because I've figured out how I feel about this, that means it's the only truth."

Do you have any lyrics that you wish people paid more attention to?

If I felt like there was an important line, I would just repeat it. One of the lines that rings the most true every time I sing it, is at the end of "Black Eye." It goes "I'm trying to balance everything." That just feels like an affirmation, and an apology, and a reassurance. It is a kindness to myself every time I sing that line.

I think the songs that aren't singles still feel important to me. Like, "I'm Already Enough." That song is really just about that line more or less, it's about getting to scream that. I think that is a central theme of the record as well—trying to convince and insert an idea into my consciousness, and bring it into reality so I can let it live in my muscles and my body.

The last one that comes to mind is, "Staying Down Low." At the end of the song all the different backing vocals start singing, "Staying down low," and saying things all at once. Gradually they bounce off of each other in canon, and then eventually it's all of the voices united saying something powerful and affirmative. I wanted it to feel like all the voices in your head are finally agreeing on something. It felt like a rare moment of euphoria.

I know you're touring soon. Do the songs change when you are sharing them in a public space in real time?

I am trying to see live shows as an opportunity to create some lightness and generate some energy. When writing the songs, I was imagining a time when I was not locked in my house and able to be playing gigs again. I feel like I planted that intention seed way back when, which was, if I can be in the room with people, I really want to be present and open, and share this hopeful, soothing vibe. I haven't got to do it much, so I'm really excited to go on tour. It's also really expensive and terrifying in the world we're in, but I'm really excited. That's kind of the only thing I want to do now. I've forgotten that version of myself, so I'd like to get back to her again.

Angie McMahon Recommends:

Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

School of Song—online music course community

Elizabeth David's flourless chocolate cake recipe

Insight Timer meditation app

Learning Qi Gong

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