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As told to Maddie Crum, 1859 words.

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# On healing through the creative process

Musician Buck Meek (Big Thief) discusses untying a knot inside himself with his writing, creating mental catalysts, swimming in the ocean, and how abstraction can be useful.

**I'm told that you're calling from a place with a spotty connection. How does it feel to be disconnected, technologically speaking?**

Oh, it's such a relief. Although sometimes my connection is pretty strong up here, but you never know when it's going to go out, which is, yeah, kind of a relief.

**Has your relationship to place been affected by quarantine? A lot of your music seems to either be about a setting or to be a product of its setting. Your lyrics are imagistic and your albums are generally recorded in remote places.**

Yes. I've been in Topanga Canyon for the majority of the pandemic, living up in the mountains. And I believe that my relationship to the place has just been more focused. I've been spending so much time in silence, just sitting in my garden. I've had the luxury to move slowly through this environment, which has been a real blessing for me as a human being and also as a writer. I try to open myself to more reaction-based writing. There's just so much to react to in nature; it's such a living environment, obviously. And the closer you pay attention, the more there is to react to.

**I'm guessing you haven't performed for a crowd in a while. Do you miss that experience?**

Yeah, I miss it so much. This is my first experience putting out a record and not having the ability to tour immediately. And it's really a vulnerable experience to put so much work into an album, for almost two years of recording and mixing and then just planning, and then to not be able to go out and share it with people, and commune with an audience. But I'm trying to embrace it, because in some ways it feels like a really rare opportunity to release the album in the true sense of the word. To actually release it into the world and let it go and move on to the next one, without having to go through the cycle of playing shows and sharing those songs. So I'm trying to embrace it and it's vulnerable. It's like letting something go and not knowing what it's up to at night, and having no control. I'm actually getting more and more excited about that though. It's just been a season of reflection and trying to sit with myself, which is always a good thing, even though it can be hard.

**You've spoken in another interview about your song-writing process, which you've said begins with mumbling and other abstract sounds. I'm curious about your interest in abstraction and spontaneity as a starting point. Have you always written songs this way?**

No. I think when I first started writing songs, I was approaching it more literally or narratively in the beginning, but through observing some of my close friends and some of my heroes write, I pretty quickly shifted into at least starting the process from a more subconscious space, or a more instinctual space. And I've really come to believe that it's all there. It's all already there, and if you can just kind of open the window and step out of the way, at least at the beginning of the process, with your subconscious mind, you can unearth so much raw material, and then go back and sift through that and shape it.

**Say you're having a bad day and your writing or playing feels overdetermined. What do you find is usually getting in the way? And how do you get yourself back into a head space that lends itself to spontaneity?**

I think, first off, the easiest thing is to put down the guitar and step away and distract myself a little

bit and come back to it. But the more I write, the more I try to put myself in a kind of trance, and try to push through those moments of disconnection or self-consciousness, because I feel when I really do put myself kind of under my own spell, is when it really starts to move.

And so within that context of moving through the loss of focus, I think I try to throw myself a curveball by creating kind of a limitation mentally. For instance, creating something to react to specifically that is very limited and then going from there. If I'm feeling stuck, maybe just to put on a song, for instance, and copy a melody for a second, a melody that I'm drawn to. Just to sing along with a melody, and then turn the song off and go from there and just see what reaction that creates. Trying to create chemical reactions within my own mental process, just as a little catalyst.

**Beyond your own music, are there other sources of abstraction you enjoy?**

I've been spending some time in the ocean at nighttime, which is a really powerful thing in that the horizon disappears, and especially in the summertime when the water is the right temperature, it's warm enough to kind of forget that you're submerged in water. It just feels like you're floating in space essentially. And with the stars reflecting on the water and the loss of horizon and the movement of tides, there's this sense of levitation. You're just being held in this really serene space, and I've been really loving that.

I love the ocean at night, because there's also this huge element of fear, for me at least. There's these moments of panic where I'm suddenly aware of the potential of a monster or a tidal wave. There's some element of danger, but then that's constantly in flux and quelled by this depth of serenity, too. It's a wild thing.

**I want to ask about your relationship to narrative, which you mentioned earlier, or maybe your relationship to drama. Your songs often have characters, but they don't always have a plot that moves through linear time. To what extent would you say you're interested in narrative, in songwriting or in life?**

Good question. I suppose I'm interested in providing just enough context to give myself or the listener some sense of communion or some sense of subjective place within the song. Almost creating an environment that I or the listener can inhabit as a human being, which I think to a certain degree requires some human reference point, or even an environmental reference point, like the time of day or the weather, or a smell or the quality of the light in the room. Or then, of course, a character. Another human character. And I love this phenomenon of creating just enough stimulus in that regard, where there's somewhere to jump off from, but also not to the point where you limit the subjectivity of the experience, for myself or for the listener.

I try to unearth songs that are interpretable to a certain degree, but also gently push you in a certain direction simultaneously. And I'm also fascinated by creating multiple characters in a song, and giving them a relationship, nodding towards the relationship or towards the conversation, or exposing certain fragments of the conversation between two people or certain relationship dynamics, but also leaving some space there. Kind of introducing characters to each other in a song and allowing space for that relationship to build within the heart and mind of the empty space, basically.

**You've described your latest album as confessional. I'm curious what that genre or that word means to you.**

I think the act of writing these songs was just a healing process for myself. Not with every song in this collection, but with many of these songs I was just externalizing some process or some conflict or something. So I was untying some knot in myself with these songs. And, of course, the act of externalizing an emotion is so healing and lifts so much weight off your chest. But it's a complex knot to untie, and you're kind of tying it and untying it simultaneously through the writing process itself. And these songs were confessional in that way. I was trying to be as specific as I possibly could with myself and really honoring the specifics, even in their extreme abstraction or in their own obliqueness.

**That makes sense. I'm guessing your work with Big Thief is less confessional, and more of a dynamic collaboration. What do you enjoy about being part of a small community, as opposed to working on your own?**

I've never really thought about my work in Big Thief as confessional or not. But now that I think of it, my role in Big Thief is much more instrumental, as a guitar player. I do sing in the background and I do sometimes write with Adrianne. And I'll contribute little things here and there to the writing process. But for the most part, my contribution is instrumental and atmospheric. But for me it feels extremely confessional. I feel I can open up. I can be completely naked on the guitar and I think I feel very much unhinged and open-hearted on the stage, and with my guitar, in that project.

Big Thief is a collective of people that trust each other so deeply. We really trust and support each other just being ourselves. And it's a very democratic creative system in that way. And I think that's probably given me courage to be more open-hearted and confessional in my own writing.

**Your album came out very recently. Are you now in a more exploratory phase with your own work? And if so, what does that look like for you?**

In the absence of a release tour, it seems to only make sense to start writing the next record. And I've already written quite a few songs over the course of quarantine. I think now I'm focusing my direction and just writing another collection of songs. And also in the absence of touring, I've been feeling this pull

to teach, and I've been collaborating with my friend, Steven Van Betten of the band Fell Runner. He's created this beautiful website called School of Song, trying to design a new format for group lessons for song-writing and for guitar. And so I'm going to teach some lessons. I'm starting in spring. And so I've been putting a lot of thought into that as well, trying to come up with a curriculum. I think that, in some ways, is probably fulfilling this need to share and have a sense of community.

Buck Meek Recommends:

*Healing with Medicinal Plants of the West* by Cecilia Garcia and James D. Adams Jr.

*Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History* by Dan Flores

*Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History* by S.C. Gwynne

*Los Remedios: Traditional Herbal Remedies of the Southwest* by Michael Moore

*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee : An Indian History of the American West* by Dee Brown

Name

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Vocation

Musician


Fact

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Robbie Jeffers

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