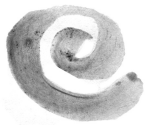
On rediscovering your passion temporarily abandoning it



Musician Cate Le Bon discusses the value of working in solitude, taking a break from music in order to study furniture making, and why it’s important to understand your own motivations.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2864 words.

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I understand that prior to making your most recent record, you basically went away to work in isolation for a long while. Do you find that it’s important to always try and change up your way of working, or to throw a wrench of some sort into the process?

I think what’s truly important to me is to try and reach a place where you’re almost able to annihilate identity. In doing that you allow yourself to disappear into the work. The opportunities are endless. You don’t trap yourself in the amber of expectations or a perceived audience. You’re not really seeking approval anymore. In doing that you’re kind of allowing the process to be whatever it needs to be in order to make a record that you can truly stand by.

It’s really about getting out of your own way, which is much easier said than done. Just letting whatever most naturally needs to come out, come out.

Absolutely. I think you should let whatever comes out come out without questioning it or putting parameters around it or thinking that you have to deal in absolutes. It’s that thing that John Keats talks about, that negative capability, which is to be comfortable with ambiguity and to not have to always define something. Not everything has to have a reason necessarily, just as long as it feels right.

When you decide, for example, to go away somewhere and say, “I’m just going to go to this place and try and make things and see what happens”—how do you stave off the fear and anxiety that perhaps nothing will happen? Or when you might suddenly feel stuck?

I suppose you kind of have to trust yourself and you have to trust the mistakes you make and the output that you create isn’t necessarily something you need to release or share. You always learn something new, even from the terrible stuff you make, and it’s part of the process really. It’s really just about the continuity of work. It’s up to you what you show to people. It’s part of the deal, isn’t it? If you’re going to allow yourself to be completely honest with yourself then you’re going to make things that are terrible at times. You have to learn to be comfortable with that.

Are you a person who can abandon things when you feel like they’re not working, or is it important to do due diligence and see each experiment through?

I have abandoned projects before. There were a few songs I was working on for this record that proved difficult. I

think I probably should have abandoned them sooner than I did. I think it maybe would have saved them, in a way.

Having made several records at this point, do you take comfort in the fact that, even when it seems like things maybe aren't coming together, you know that you've done this before and that eventually things will fall into place? Or is there that fear of, "Oh, maybe this time it isn't gonna work."

Yeah. Oh, god. This record. Everything changed when I took a break from music. That in itself is freeing in a way that can be quite terrifying. In a way, this honestly felt like the first record I've ever made, even with the knowledge of all the past records I've made as well. That past knowledge was comforting and at times I think it was frustrating because I'd be in the studio going, "Why doesn't this thing that I always do work?"

Once you get over that frustration and you allow the songs to dictate what they want to be, things change. Then I was able to serve the songs. This was the most involved I've ever been in making a record, which sounds ridiculous but it's true.

Do you mean that in the sense of you being the most involved in controlling every aspect of the process?

I guess so. When I wrote these songs my priority at the time was going to furniture school. The songs weren't being written under this cloud of, "You're making a record!" My motives were different when I was writing the songs. Writing music was kind of cathartic outlet. It was a hobby again. That was a different kind of awareness. You know?

In turn, they became quite personal and I developed this long-standing relationship with them because they existed in an unrecorded state for a lot longer than songs on other records. They became almost like solid structures during the course of that year when I was in school. Also, I was quite precious about them. Instead of opening the door all at once for a band of people to come and play them with me, I kind of opened it incrementally so that I was working one-on-one with people as opposed to filling the room. In doing that, you ultimately lose control. Also, it is hard being creative and critical at the same time. If you yourself are part of the band then you can't step back and really be focused on what everyone is doing as much.

How did you arrive at the decision to take a break from making music and go back to school to study furniture making? Why did that feel important?

I think because I'd been in that cycle of making a record, touring, and then making a record and touring for so long that it became difficult to identify what my motives were anymore. When you're making music and ultimately asking people to invest in something you're doing, you have to be sure that you yourself are invested, or it's an unfair ask.

So, at a certain point it was kind of obvious to me that I needed to have a reset, as opposed to just reaching a point where I was so burnt out that I just gave up music entirely. I wanted to concentrate and fill my time with something else, mostly just as a test to see what might happen. I wanted to do something else without really putting any pressure on myself to identify what the problems with my relationship with music had become.

And it was great. You take the pressure off, and all of a sudden it can be wonderful. Music became a hobby. I even consumed music differently. It was a revelation, really. I only wish I had done it sooner.

When you're holding onto something so hard and it feels like everything is hanging in the balance, that can strangely inhibit you. In looking the other way for a while, it's almost as if the horse comes back to you. Suddenly the horse is following you around the field as opposed to you chasing it with a rope.

Going to school to study architecture and furniture making is ostensibly a very different thing than making songs or recording an album, but did you find in any way that the two processes inform each other? Or that the task of making a physical object made you think differently about how you made music?

Yeah. I think with any creative disciplines they end up informing each other. There were little things I noticed after the fact, little similarities between them. I'd always give the pieces of furniture that I made away. If I was making something and somebody would say, "Could I have that?" I'd go, "Yeah. Of course. When I'm finished you can have it." People in the school thought I was crazy because you spend hours and hours and hours with this piece of furniture and then to just… give it away? But I found it quite comforting to be working on something knowing that there would come a point where I would let it go. I think that comes from making music and knowing that there's a point when you have to give it away and it's no longer yours.

I know it sounds trite but you learn that the reward is in the making. That's your part to possess and no one can really take that away from you. When it's finished, it's gone. I think that's why I was keen to just rid myself of the object and then start something new.

Strangely—and it wasn't by design—the process of recording the songs that I'd written in the Lake District almost mirrored the process of making a piece of furniture. The songs had been around for so long that to me they became like solid structures. I'd never really taken anything like that into a studio before. It just becomes an intimate process between you and your material where some days things are going great and some days it's a really tempestuous relationship. The material dictates how your day is going to go. Thankfully the kind of patience that I learned in making furniture really, really saved the record in a way.

There's something about the physicality of making things with your hands that just really can't be beat. It's deeply meditative to have all of your energy focused on an object that you can touch.

What I love about it is that it changes the whole economy of time. It's so grounding and it's just really such a nourishing thing—to return to a thing that you're working on and just do that all day. Time just loses all value. It's good for the old noggin.

Is furniture building a practice that you'll continue?

Yes, though it is not the easiest thing to keep picking up. Especially when traveling. Since leaving school I've managed to put time aside to work on things. I've built two chairs since then and I'm working on building a workshop at my house so that I can keep it up. It's just nice to have two things that you're preoccupied with. It frees both of those things up because you can always take a break from one of them, but you're still immersing yourself in something you love. It's just a really lovely thing to do.

I think the thing I love the most is that it's so hard to pull yourself away from doing something when it's such an enjoyable process. For example, when I'm planing a piece of wood. I always just want to do one more pass. Even if I know I've reached the line I'm like, "I'll just do one more pass." There's something really magnetic about this kind of work. That order that goes along with the process is really reassuring as well.

Was there ever a point where you thought maybe you wouldn't make music anymore?

Yes, actually. But there was something really good about reaching that point and going, "Well, I don't *have* to do this." You can live many lives. You can have many chapters. Once you've almost drawn that exit door in your mind, it kind of stops you from panicking about it because you then know that door exists and you can always walk through it if you choose. That understanding gives you the space you need to just recalibrate.

You collaborated with Deerhunter as a producer on their most recent record, and you've worked similarly with other artists in the past. How important is it to take on projects like that, or to work on things that perhaps aren't specifically yours or about you, per se?

I mean, whether you're in a studio watching other people work, or whether it's your record, it's *always* going to change your process a little bit. Even with bad experiences in making music with people, you're always going to come away having learned something about yourself or the process. You also have to go into working as a producer for a band with the understanding that it's never about you. That makes you more receptive, more malleable in a

way. Again, you have to surrender yourself to that idea, otherwise it will be really hard. Digression is really important and allowing yourself that space to digress is how you better yourself. Otherwise things stagnate.

Working with people—especially someone like Bradford Cox, where you have no idea what's going to happen from one minute to the next—is exhilarating. At first I found it hard to keep up, but then I thought it was incredible to learn to let go. So yes, I'd say it's hugely important to work with other people, even just to watch other people work, and to always be open to going new places.

You mention feeling caught up in that cycle that so many musicians work in—tour, record, tour, record. How do you avoid getting stuck on that kind of professional treadmill when this is what you do for a living?

I don't know. I guess it's down to the individual, isn't it? Again, I suppose I was teetering on the precipice of stopping. I had those thoughts of, "Well, I might not do this anymore," so there was nothing really hanging in the balance when I decided to take a break. I'm sure there are some people that would find it horrifying to take a break from something that you've been doing for so long. I don't really know.

I *do* know now what's important to me when I make a record: that my motives are in check and that I'm not making a record so that I can simply keep the wheels turning. That was really freeing for me, and it makes me feel excited that I managed to identify what it is I love and I want about music. It's also important to identify the things that I don't care about. I guess it's different for everyone, isn't it? What's important to me is authenticity and being able to stand by something that I've done.

Do you find that your own parameters for what success looks like have changed a lot over the years?

Absolutely. It's easy when you're young to be caught up in the more surface-level rewards of being a musician and making music. They don't last for long. Honestly, I know this sounds so trite, but taking that time off and really having a reckoning with myself was so important. Spending so much time with Bradford and seeing his dedication to the integrity of art and music was just amazing. It's so inspiring.

I've just toured this new record for the first time and played the first shows with an incredible band. Honestly, I've never ever been happier making or playing music and I've never felt more content about where I am or what I'm doing. We played a show in Toulouse and—this is not like me at all—I just started crying from absolute joy. Happiness that I was playing music with these wonderful people and that I felt completely content and joyful from it. All I ever wanted from music is just to feel that joy. It would be hard to dedicate so much time to something that you don't get that from.

I think it's important that everyone, no matter what you do, have the occasional moment where you step back and ask, "OK, why am I *really* doing this?"

Yeah, because you don't *have* to do be doing it, do you? It's almost like gardening, isn't it? You have to spend a bit of time tending things, finding the best way to let things grow.

Has your approach to playing music live changed considerably as well?

I suppose so. I realized that I didn't want to play guitar on stage anymore. You know, again, it's like an annihilation of a certain identity. People are saying to you, "But you're a guitar player!" But I just didn't want to. I felt like it was distracting me from singing the songs and really trying to translate the songs to the audience. I think I've always used the guitar as almost a barrier. It's been really amazing to just let that go. It's been wonderful just allowing myself to really get into being a singer and a performer.

Again, a lot of this I learned from working with Bradford. There's almost that dichotomy of wanting to play music live but also thinking that you have to be coy about it—being on stage but not allowing yourself to connect with the fact that it is a performance and you're trying to transpose something onto the audience. Like, what does it mean? Who is it really for? It's almost indescribable, and that's a good thing because once you start talking in

assertions and absolutions you put parameters on something and it kills the experience. The joy of playing live is something almost indescribable and you have to rid yourself of that coyness and allow yourself to really go there. It took me a long time to learn that.

Cate Le Bon Recommends:

solitude

going for a long walk without your phone

an artist called Lee Krasner

an essay by Rebecca Solnit called "Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable"

Name
Cate Le Bon

Vocation
Musician, Artist

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