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As told to Sammy Maine, 2027 words.

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# On trusting your vision

**Musician Danielle Aykroyd (Vera Sola) discusses following your instincts, finding humor in your work, and how a deepening spirituality can lead to surprising art.**

**When you made your debut album, you made it in almost total isolation. Looking back on that now, what do you think were the benefits of making that record in that way?**

When I started that process, I'd never made my own music before. I'd played in a former partner's band and secretly done stuff, but I'd certainly never played it for anyone, and especially not my own songs. I really didn't have any experience with recording and arranging and performing at all. I had a pretty cataclysmic event happen before this that opened up my channel of creativity. I didn't want to bring in anyone else's energy. I knew that I had such a force coming through me, that it needed to be self-contained and everything needed to be generated by this force. So that was one part of it. Then the other part of it was that I didn't trust myself to be able to communicate my vision to other people, and to be able to hold my ground. I had such a specific vision for what I wanted.

There were a couple of moments that I even think about now where my friend who was engineering it, he'd hear me play something and he'd be like, "I don't think that's the right chord." And he'd say it nicely, he'd be like, "I don't think that's right." And I would be like, "Oh, no, no, that's exactly right. It sounds wrong, but it's right." I trusted him so much and loved him so much, I was able to communicate that to him and feel safe in that. But at that moment, had there been other musicians, it would have changed the whole thing. That process proved to myself that I could do it and create what I wanted. That enabled me to move on into collaborative spaces and hold my own even when I'm doing something that's musically unconventional or wrong.

**What have you found to be the most important tools that you utilize now when you're working with other people? How have you gained that confidence?**

Honestly, it's an anchoring in myself. Knowing that what I want is what I want. It doesn't really matter if anybody else thinks it's right or not. This is my music, this is my vision, this is my expression of self, and it doesn't have to be in the right key signature. We can change keys as many times as I want within a single verse if it fits my vision. We don't have to be playing this on this instrument that it would usually be played on. We don't have to be recording this in a way that has ever been done before. This is an entirely new endeavor because it's an entirely new piece of art that's coming from an entirely new place. Then you deal with individuals in different ways, and sometimes people can hang and sometimes they can't. It doesn't mean they're not brilliant. On this last record I made, there were a couple of people who were the best at what they do, but that might have been limiting for them in the sense of where they would allow themselves to go.

**What are the key things that you look for when you're thinking about working with someone?**

The collaborative spirit is huge. They really have to be willing to think outside of their own box and be willing to get weird. Also lack of judgment is really important to me now, at least, because I think that a beginner's mind is super important and not judging anything at all. They have to give space for play and malleability and breaking the rules. When it comes to the band, at this point it comes down to: are you a joy to hang out with? That is the single most important quality for me when it comes to playing music. I've played with some really brilliant people who just aren't great in the van and that's a deal breaker.

**You can't teach someone to be a good hang.**

At this point in my life I can't deal with negativity anymore. I used to be a lot more negative. When you're in that space, maybe you thrive off of each other and live on that shit. At this point though,

life's too short. We're super lucky to be able to do this.

**Do you do things outside of creating music to help foster the playful tendencies of your songs?**

It all merges together for me. I mean, I created a persona. There is a life outside of music for me, but my music is in so many ways a reflection of myself. So, intrinsic to my nature that it's almost difficult to think about one thing that I do that fosters a playful sensibility. I'm super playful. When I wake up, I sing nonsense all day. It drives my loved ones insane. I make up totally mad songs from morning to night, and I'm always dancing and moving. The older I get, the more I look at the world with this childlike wonder. The more I'm able to see the cosmic giggle. God's laugh and how important humor is.

People think my music is super serious but there are jokes woven into it constantly. There are musical jokes. There are jokes in the lyrics. The name itself is kind of a bad joke. It started off as this inside joke with myself, which is also sort of pretentious because I am sort of pretentious. We were on tour in Europe, and this woman came up to my drummer and said that in Italian it means kind of shitty, or a little bit disappointing, which is the greatest thing. That's the perfect explanation of what's going on in this music. It is both Latin for "truth alone" and Roman Italian for "a little bit disappointing, kind of shitty."

**When we're approaching art or creative spaces, we don't need the rigidity of it's either this or that. It's both.**

That is what my music is. I think that's what life is for me too. Even in the most heartbreaking, excruciating moments of my life, there has always been something that is kind of funny about it. That's one of the great joys and what I'm so grateful for is that truly even in the worst—and I have been through some really horrible, brutal shit—I've always been able to lean back on that humor. Then through everything, I'm able to see the nuance and the complexity of all of it. That's the human experience, ultimately, is this tragedy and this comedy.

**Is spirituality something that is important to your creative process?**

Absolutely. It's important to everything that I do, it's suffused in everything that I do. I have a deep spiritual life, and everything in life is spiritual. It's all god, everything, and I don't mean the god with the white hair. This project came to me as a lightning bolt. It radically changed my life and radically changed my relationship to myself and my sense of spirit and my sense of connection with the world. It's only expanded and it only expands the more that I play in music and the more that I am able to both empty myself entirely. Then the music can come through me and I can see myself fully in the music, the deeper that sense of spirituality becomes.

**What's your relationship now with your voice?**

It is pretty cool. It's open. I'm still working on limbic system patterning of that fear that's very deep in me. I'd say 90% of it is gone, that original fear that prevented me from singing. There are still some things in my body. My jaw and my tongue are really still locked up. But the more that I work on that, the more at ease I am and the more anchored I feel in my voice. I know that it's my primary instrument and my primary gift is my voice on Earth.

**Do you think getting a good reception to the record really helped with the confidence, or is it separate?**

I probably wouldn't feel as secure in it had it been completely panned. Even in the interim, the difference between that record and this most recent one and the touring process, it was really the usage of my voice that brought me to this place of confidence. With the first record, I conquered the fear of my voice. With this new one, I found the power. That power is something that can't come from the outside. It can't come from reception, it can't come from anyone else's perspective. That is something that has to come from really deep inside or else it's false.

**A lot of your work touches upon the environment and topics that are often at the forefront of people's minds. What role do you think artists play in spreading awareness? Is it something that you actively think about before you approach writing?**

I think it's changed. It used to be something that I thought about, and I used to write pretty overtly political songs as a way to reach people and spread a message, and use my voice for something that I believed. Those songs are rad. They're really wonderful and I'm proud of them. As I've deepened in my practice, that too comes from a place of writing for other people. I think that that is not as powerful as writing something that comes from within me because it's something that I've been sitting with and thinking about and processing in myself. There's a difference. It's like an external force and an internal force. And so the more recent songs are internally motivated, and I feel like they come from an even deeper connection to the issue at hand.

**As someone who's extremely detail oriented, how do you approach editing your work?**

It's both a great challenge and a gift of mine. I do it mercilessly and it takes me a long time. I don't have any problem killing things. And maybe to my own detriment even.

**Do you feel as though anything is ever finished?**

That's a real challenge for me. I mean, even now listening to this record that I just made walking down the street in New York, I'm hearing stuff that I would have changed. I really need somebody to tell me, "You're done," for me to know that something's finished because I will go forever and it'll endlessly shape shift. It's the same with the way that my songs play out on stage. They're never complete arrangements. I cannot play to a click track. I cannot play with recorded tracks. It has to be ever shifting and ever changing based on my emotionality and my connection to the song and connection to the audience and the place we're playing in. That's where I'm lucky in that we have the recording and then we have the life of the songs that comes after.

Danielle Aykroyd Recommends:

**Marvel at it all:** Try always to look at the world through the eyes of a child. Foster that deep connection to the magic and miracle and strangeness of the everyday.

**Keep a dream journal:** It's crazy in there! Why would you waste such weird and fertile soil? In some cultures dream life is more important than waking life. And the more you record your dreams the better you'll get at remembering the finer details.

**Attempt creation above your perceived skill level:** Challenge yourself, the worst thing that happens is you fail. Or you have to improve your skills to meet your ambitions. And if you don't quite get there maybe something wild and new will come of it.

**Make Art for Yourself Alone:** Nothing you do for the approval of other people will ever make you truly happy.

**And if all else fails, go for a walk:** Remind yourself that everything is alive.

Name

Danielle Aykroyd

Vocation


musician, poet, producer


Fact


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