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As told to Max Freedman, 2604 words.

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# On the power of friendship and community

**Musician El Kempner (Palehound) discusses the creative advantages of a slow-burn artistic career and the role of friends in inspiration and collaboration. If we divide micro, as in your personal life, versus macro-like, how bad the world is—I hope that things on a micro-scale are going okay for you.**

They definitely are. That's the thing that's also confusing. Things are going really well for me right now with *[Eye on the Bat]* coming out, and I'm finally getting back into doing what I love to do, which has been such a gift. It's this weird juxtaposition between my micro-universe popping off and the world being just completely doom landscape shit.

**You've been steadily making and releasing music for a decade. What do you mean when you say you're getting back into what you love?**

I did the *Bachelor* record [*Doomin' Sun*, in 2021]. The last Palehound record was in 2019, so it's been four years since that. In a sense, I feel like I'm getting back into it in that way.

It also feels like I'm getting back into it because we're going to tour again after the pandemic completely raged through all our tours, even the ones in 2021 and 2022. It does feel like this is finally the moment where I'm actually getting back into something and not just hesitantly putting my foot in, getting bitten, and then retreating. I can finally play shows again. We can headline again for the first time in four years.

**How have you gotten ready for this all?**

I arranged a great live lineup of my friends. Larz Brogan has been my bassist and best friend for a really long time, but we have a new drummer, Jamie Pompei, and Beck Zegans is our newest addition, and she's going to be playing rhythm guitar and doing backing vocals. I'm trying to build the best team to do this with, and we're already rehearsing and getting as prepared as possible to put on the best set we can and trying to get into the ticket-selling mindset, which is not my favorite thing, but is exciting right now just because we can do it.

**Friendship has been a recurring thread in your music, but many people think of music as a space to explore romantic instead of platonic love. Why has friendship provided you with such strong creative fodder?**

To me, friendship is just as powerful as romance. Friendship has been such a huge part of my relationship to music from the beginning, because friendship got me into it in the first place. I wanted to play guitar so I could make friends, because I didn't have a ton of friends when I was a kid because I was really shy and gay and weird. That's a huge reason why I love music in the first place.

I've loved collaborating with friends over the years. That's what it's about for me. It's about getting on the road with friends and having these incredible experiences traveling and touring. With *Bachelor*, learning a lot from a friend, having Melina Duterte [*of Jay Som*] teach me so much about not only how to produce, but also waking me up to my own potential in a way that only a friend could. With a lover, you're kind of like, "Did you really believe that, or do you just think I'm cute?" But friends will give it to you straight, and that's so powerful, and that's why I have trust in friends that I can only have for

them, and that's why it's so consistent for me.

**How has collaborating with anybody who wasn't a friend beforehand been different?**

[During lockdown], Samia sent me a song of hers to remix. Pillow Queens sent me a song to remix, but that was all very virtual, over the internet, not meeting these people. It's this other way of learning how to connect with people and understand complete strangers.

I've done some collaborative work with total strangers in person in L.A. I went out there and was like, "I wonder what doing pop writing sessions would feel like." That was fun, but I couldn't collaborate on my own music with a stranger. I need to get to know somebody first, know their work, and [know] them as a person before I feel totally comfortable doing that.

**Is that a thing of emotional safety? Is it the shyness from childhood coming back?**

I think it's emotional safety. Vulnerability is hard, especially in a writing sense, when you go into a session with a stranger who doesn't know your whole life story, not that every friend has to. But I ask myself, "Can I suggest this kind of horny line, or will they think that's weird?" "Can I suggest this sad turn of events for this story, or will they be bummed out?" It's just second-guessing. Because I had so much experience with social rejection in my early years, I'm on edge a little bit with that stuff and have more self-doubt.

The music industry is full of really scary, intimidating people. It could be like, "Oh, do this session with this person." I can be like, "Wow, I love their work," and that makes me even more scared, or like, "That person has had a lot of success, and what if they think I'm just trying to ride on their coattails?" That's the other thing about the way collaboration gets thrown together in the music industry sometimes that I feel weird about. I'm not trying to network. I'm not trying to do shit like that. I'm just trying to connect. But it's a weird gray area with how that shit's structured sometimes.

**A lot of indie musicians, given the music industry's instability and barriers, have to hop among labels, but you've done three Palehound albums and one Bachelor album with Polyvinyl. Can you talk more about how having a consistent team has helped your creativity?**

I honestly have been really blessed with Polyvinyl. I've had a lot of sheer dumb luck in this business, just meeting great people.

My career has definitely been a slow burn. There hasn't been a moment in my career that's been like, "This is it. We're selling out shows. We're doing this." That makes it even more important to have a label like Polyvinyl, and a team like theirs, because they're a rare label that cares about the music so much, and they believe in their artists. [Polyvinyl] just cares about the artists and putting out the best music they can, for the sake of the artist, the sake of the audience, and the sake of themselves as music lovers. I think that's totally rare. Even friends of mine on similar indie labels—it's not even major labels that are the only evil ones. Some of these indie labels are out here fucking shit up, too. I feel like I found a true diamond in the rough with that team.

This is what I'm talking about with the power of friendship and community. I got into this business when I was 19 years old, and I identify as a nonbinary person now, but I was a 19-year-old girl at the time, and... I was so lucky to end up in the Exploding in Sound community, because I learned the value of the love of music over...there was no competitive element. It wasn't like, "These people are playing this show. Ugh, I wish I could sell tickets," or bullshit like that. It was, "These three bands I love are playing the show, and they're each going to make like \$40 and that's sick, it's fine. Everybody's so happy to be here because we're all having fun, and we're all so inspired by each other." I was so lucky to immediately enter a community that valued inspiration over commodification.

Also, there were a lot of dudes on that label, and as a 19-year-old girl, I was extremely lucky to be surrounded by not-weird men, but instead really nice, sweet, supportive guys like Dan Goldin. Dan Goldin is another, to use this term again, diamond in the rough, a label guy that is not going to take advantage of you, and wants to see you grow and will haul ass for you at his expense. That's so rare and special.

**Do you still have a day job? How have you figured out how to make a living through your music?**

I teach guitar and songwriting over Zoom privately, which I started doing during the pandemic. That's been something I've been doing consistently for the past couple of years, and I've really loved teaching.

I feel very blessed to have a lot of different avenues to pursue, and finding a whole other way of loving music through a career perspective, which is teaching, was a huge W for me, because I didn't know that until I tried it. But it's cool because it opens up this whole other path that I could take if, for some reason, Palehound touring doesn't work out. I'm perfectly happy continuing to teach and do what I've been doing because it's been awesome.

**Earlier, you mentioned getting into the ticket-selling mindset. I'm curious to hear more about that because it evokes marketing and promotion, which, no matter what mixed feelings you might have about that and its relation to capitalism, is part of the gig.**

It literally is what we have to do, and it's what I want to do. I want to play full rooms. I want to keep

growing so that I can pay my bandmates more, so that I can get better opportunities supporting bands that I grew up loving. I love that this band has had a slow burn, because it makes everything so exciting. It's not like we had this big spike and then got numb to opportunities. This year, we're opening for Jimmy Eat World, which is fucking sick. It's a band we all grew up loving.

Ticket sales have been a struggle my whole career. We haven't had that super buzzy moment that leads to instant Instagram followers and ticket sales and shit like that. It's a struggle, and it does make me super self-conscious, and I really don't like the numbers element of it. I get a lot of anxiety about that, because I've played so many empty rooms, and that is so disheartening. I want to sell out shows, but I want to have fun as well. I want us to play great shows that are energetically sick.

**Have you ever approached burnout with Palehound or the non-creation side of it all?**

We've done a lot of really hard tours. We've played a lot of shitty shows, and we got totally screwed with COVID. We went on the road in February 2020, and we got all the way to Oregon and were about to start a string of our first sold-out headlining shows ever the day the tour got canceled. It was this thing I'd been working at. It was just so heartbreaking.

That was the closest I got to burnout. I was like, "Oh my fucking god. I finally thought this was happening. The work has paid off." And then, this tragic, horrifying factor just annihilate[d] it and all potential for future work. I think all of us felt that, but the pandemic was definitely the closest I've felt to burnout, and then, also, the post-pandemic support tours we did.

I haven't toured in almost a year, because 2022 was just an awful year for us touring-wise. We got totally screwed over and over again, and that was really hard, because I was like, "I'm trying to be hopeful. I'm trying to go forward thinking this can get better, but fuck, it's not."

**How have you noticed the tours and the moments after them shaping your creative process?**

I wrote a lot of [*Eye on the Bat*] as a response to that experience with the COVID tour cutting us off. "Eye on the Bat," the title track of the album, is about that tour, that apocalypse road trip home, where we were just out there literally making tuna sandwiches out of the back of our van in the Badlands because the McDonald's drive-thru was closed, which is fucking unheard of, at like 6:00 pm on a Tuesday. Shit was shutting down and we were like, "Oh my god. This is insane. Are we even going to find food?" A lot of this album was a response to that.

I made that song the title track, and I made that the title of the album, because it does kind of encapsulate how I was feeling the past few years. You can have your eye on the ball all you want and think you're going to hit it, but if you don't know how you're going to respond to it, and if you don't know how you're going to handle a fucking curveball, you're fucked, and I got fucked.

**In general, over your 10 years doing this, what changes have you noticed in your creative process?**

So many changes, because I've changed as a person so much. One of the biggest changes is getting more honest with my work as time goes on. I think you have an identity crisis your entire twenties, essentially. I'm 29 now, and I'm still having an identity crisis and probably will forever, but with every year I get to know myself better and better, which informs my songs.

A lot of people have been saying, "[*Eye on the Bat*] feels like your most honest album," or "This feels like the most vulnerable songwriting you've done." It's just because I'm just getting older. I'm not trying to shroud my truth in metaphor anymore because I'm scared it's not actually my truth. I have confirmation about myself in ways I didn't earlier in my career.

**In the official press bio that was sent out with *Eye on the Bat*, there's a direct quote from you about how you started disregarding others' expectations. You just attested to that a bit, but can you talk more about how this has shaped your creative process?**

I caught onto that ability with the Bachelor project, where Polyvinyl gave Melina and me money to make *Doomin' Sun* before hearing any demos. They just had this blind faith in us. And then, Melina, in the studio, I learned from her and her process, which is very, you kind of write as you go.

Before that record, I had been like, "I've got to demo out the songs. I've got to make sure we're using studio time in the best, most efficient way possible." The Bachelor experience was like, "We can just fuck around until 11:00 am, record for a couple of hours, watch TV for the rest of the night, and still make a record that is cool that we're proud of." It proved to me that I didn't need to take it as seriously because we went into that studio with zero songs and left with a full album two weeks later, which proved to me that I'm wasting so much energy trying to control every element of a process, because it's impossible.

El Kempner Recommends:

*These are my favorite podcasts/the ones we all enjoy when we are in the van on tour.*

Swindled

Maintenance Phase

Lolita Podcast

Why Won't You Date Me? With Nicole Byer

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