

On capturing your moments of inspiration



Musician Ella Williams (Squirrel Flower) discusses not over-analyzing your process, the support of the community around you, and keeping parts of your creativity sacred.

May 31, 2022 -

As told to Emma Bowers, 2277 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#).

In your music and in your personal life there seems to be so much movement—there's different cities, there's nature patterns and weather and a very visceral sense of the passage of time. How are you coping with the speed of the world right now, and how is that affecting your creativity?

I don't know if I am coping. I try. The older I get the better I get at being like a leaf in a river and just trying to go with the flow and go with the rapids and the stillness and the tides. Touring is so weird and I was literally in the same house for a year and a half, not leaving because of the pandemic, now I'm going all over the place.

When I think about that too much, I start to get anxious. These past few months I've just been trying to keep it day-by-day as much as possible. I haven't been writing quite as much because I feel like I have been so on the move. So much of my emotional self and creative self has gone into more business elements of being my own tour manager and also, effectively tour managing four other people as well. Trying to put on a good show every night that feels like I'm giving my truest emotional self through the music to people who have come to see that and who need it.

I think part of going through these different speeds is also not giving myself a hard time and for not writing enough or not calling my friends enough or really, not doing anything enough. Just trying to recognize how crazy everything is and how hard I am working.

What are some resources that you've found to be grounding while you're moving so fast?

My main resource over the past couple years has been my Great aunt Vicki. She's so magical and so wise, and she's been just the steadiest, most inspiring and grounding resource for me. She's done a lot of tarot readings for me, and she also sent me a book that I feel like a lot of people have been talking about lately, *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. I had first heard of it when I was opening for Adrienne Lenker on tour in Europe in 2019, she was reading it and recommended it to me, and I was like, "Yeah, that looks really good" then I never really looked into it. But then it was gifted to me by my Great aunt Vicki and when she gave it to me, she said, "This is not for reading through from start to finish. It's for picking up when you need it." That's really what it has been for me while getting ready for tour, while being on tour. Whenever I feel like I'm going crazy or like I need some sort of grounding, I open it and read a few sentences.

I read that Squirrel Flower is a name that you had for yourself as a kid, and the songs are all your own, so I can imagine this project is one that you feel pretty attached to. As your project has grown over the last few

years, how have you stayed close to it in a way that keeps it that precious while giving parts of it to an audience and having labels and managers and producers come into the picture?

I feel like, just like anything that grows, there are moments of extreme pain and also extreme joy. I've experienced a lot of both in the process of getting a wider audience and working with more people behind the scenes, having more press and all of these things. Moments have been very hard. It's really hard to feel like you're giving yourself and your most cherished art away to anybody...I mean, I don't really care if people listen to it and decide that it's not for them. I think that's one of the beautiful things about art. But in terms of the industry side of things, it's such a blade. It's so sharp and so undone from anything art related, but at the same time, you need to roll with it. You cooperate with it and hope that it likes you. That part has been, I don't know if painful is the word. It's something that I've had to work through.

Do you find that working with a label has made that easier, harder or just different?

Well, I think working with the label made it hard in some ways, just because that means more opportunities and more treating a record as a thing that needs to be sold and marketed. Which is just how it is. As far as working with labels go, Polyvinyl is the sweetest, most human label I've ever even heard of really. They're just so sweet. But at the same time, of course, if your goal is to make a living making music, you have to, in some ways, look at it as a product and that has been really challenging for me.

Have you tried to keep anything sacred?

Many things. It's funny because I have Squirrel Flower and that's really my project that's out in the world, but most of the music I've made in the past two years hasn't even been recorded and I haven't written it down. It's mainly just me playing music with the people I love and having jam sessions until two in the morning. We're playing music for the joy of it and to express things, and to laugh and make jokes.

It's been really special to do that. Especially after a few album cycles and feeling a little detached and a little jaded about the whole thing. Then returning to music being what it should be in my mind, which is something to connect with the people that you love and express things and feel human.

I think I read in a different interview that you talked about having a long period of incubation where you're not really trying to make a thing, but just absorbing. What do those creative rhythms look like for you?

I try not to pay too much attention to or over analyze my creative process. I'm more just letting it be what it is. I don't know if there are that many patterns to it, except for the fact that sometimes I don't write and I don't make anything. And sometimes I do.

When I think back on it, there have been cycles that are a week or two weeks of doing nothing and then two weeks of writing an album. But then it's been a year of making nothing and then, three months of intense writing. It's just ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of my life, which hasn't been standard. As most people's lives aren't.

After releasing your sophomore LP, *Planet I*, you shared an EP of songs from the cutting room floor. What was that process like?

That EP is mostly demos and songs that I made when I was writing all of the songs and demoing all of the songs for *Planet (i)*, which ended up being 30 songs. I chose 14 to bring to the studio and then 12 to go on the album. I feel like that EP is a secret look into my process and the rawest versions of the songs before they're produced, and before other people come in and offer their expertise and their musical selves to it.

I worked with other musicians and a producer on the record (*Planet I*), and I just really liked the idea of sharing these things that, for the most part, were just me making things. Even though my mom was like, "It's too much reverb." And I was like, "Okay, mom, I don't care. Get out of my room." No, just kidding. I mean, my mom is incredibly supportive of me in every way. And also has great musical taste and also sometimes is unsure about my

more experimental ventures.

But even though she might say something like that, or people might think different things about it, it just feels really good to share things without polishing them and still working. I spent hours making the layers, the vocal layers and the guitar sounds and constructing those demos, I guess. But I didn't spend any time thinking, "This sounds too lo-fi. I need to make it sound fancier. And I need to make this sound more palatable to a wider audience."

That's probably a nice break from creating from a place of, "All right. I have to fill my contract with my label and make polished records."

Which to be honest, I don't really think of too much, or I try not to think really about that at all when I go into making music. But, of course, it's hard to completely get that voice out of your head-of, "I'm making something that other people will hear."

It's that inner capitalist that's eating us all from the inside.

Yeah, for sure. Sometimes, I really miss the version of myself I was in 2015, the year I made my first EP as Squirrel Flower. I just made it and I didn't have to think about any of this. I was 18 and just nobody listened to my music, and that's a very freeing thing that I try to return to a lot. That time when it was just a DIY scene, making things for myself and my friends, and hoping that somebody would hear it at a basement show and be like, "That's cool. I'm going to buy a CD."

Have any of your ideas about community shifted as you've come to more success?

I mean, there are so many different people just because I've been at it for so long and there was never one moment of going from unknown to then blowing up or something. It's been such a steady trek and there have been people at all stages that have helped me immensely. In Boston there's Jason Trefts, he books under Illegally Blind and he was a fan and booked me for so many shows and really held down the local music scene when a lot of people were going away and a lot of things were changing. He's just, he's really great.

Then in Iowa, people like Andre Perry who runs Mission Creek Festival and booked me for Mission Creek three times, I think, while I was living in Iowa. I didn't really have much of a following, except for a little bit in the Massachusetts and Iowa DIY scenes, but he liked my music and wanted to help. It's people like that.

There's also people like my friend, Vera, who I played music with in college and we were in a punk band together. She always tells me that I was this for her, but I feel like she was it for me. She taught me how to look at music as something to just have fun with and not be afraid of. It's funny because she always tells me that I taught her how to write songs because I taught her how to just have fun with it, but I really feel like she was that for me.

Is that your ethos when it comes to songwriting?

Songwriting is such a weird thing. There are songs I've written where I've sat down and really intentionally written out different structures and composed things, then there are other songs that I have just literally woken up with them in my head. I feel like in the past few years, a lot of people have been like, "We need to dispel the myth of the artist who just hears a song in their head and it's divine intervention." But in all honesty, that is the way a lot of the time that my creativity happens. There's nothing and then there's something, and luckily I have my voice memo app to record it.

There's this quote that I think is from John Prine that's like-if you get the spark and hear the start of a song and you don't sit down and either play it or write it down or record it, then it's gone and you can't guarantee that you'll get that back.

"Iowa 146," the song on my recent record, happened like that. It was during the pandemic, I was just at my parents' house. I think I was just drinking whiskey and drawing in my room alone with candles lit and I just got an inkling of it. It's not like the whole song popped into my head, but I got an inkling of it and I immediately got my guitar and just hit record and started working it out. Then the whole song fell out after I untied the knot a little bit, but I almost didn't get my guitar. I almost decided "Oh, maybe I'll think of it later" or "It'll come back to me." But I'm really glad I didn't because that song means a lot to me now. And I think it's really just about capturing the moment of inspiration.

Ella Williams Recommends:

Take note of where the pigeons in your neighborhood hang out

Burn your desk

Really look at the color of pistachios

Play music with your loved ones until the sun rises or until someone throws up

Don't think about how deep the Mariana trench goes

Name

Ella Williams

Vocation

musician

□

Tonje Thilesen