

On being guided by intuition



Musician Emily A. Sprague on what led her to work with modular synths, what it means to live and work intuitively, and the pleasure that comes from deleting things and letting them go.

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As told to Maura M. Lynch, 2545 words.

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When did you know that playing music was going to be a big part of your life?

I started learning the piano from my mom, who played, and then when I got a little bit older, I think I was 11 or 12, I took guitar lessons for a few years and then I stopped. When I was 14 I started playing guitar again, but this time, I became more aware of how I wanted to use the instrument. I began bringing songs I wanted to learn to my teachers—songs that I liked—instead of just learning theory, scales, guitar solos, or stuff like that.

That was when I started trying to play guitar and sing at the same time. I can remember sitting in my living room; I was trying to [learn] a Beatles song, and I couldn't sing and play at the same time. I was so frustrated I couldn't even believe it. I kept doing that, and it started to click. I started to discover alternative music, and artists who were making not just full-band music, but folk music, and I discovered songwriting. I guess that was probably the very first moment of realizing that I'm connecting with something, like a process that I can relate my life to, and it's a creative thing. I'm an only child and have always had a little bit of an introverted existence. At that point in my life, it was the easiest way to create without having to collaborate.

My realization of, "I can create music and then manipulate sounds" was all within the same year of when I was 15 or 16. That's when I started not really paying attention in school and only thinking about music, learning about arranging songs, and how to make certain sounds from effects. I just became totally obsessed with finding different sounds, and learning how to put them all together and get this emotion. It was all about creating emotion and being totally amazed that I did that. It was a therapeutic thing to release it and feel it—and then it exists outside of your body, which I think is still a big thing about making music.

What drew you to working with modular synths?

I was living in New York and had been touring with Florist, and I wanted something to do that was really autonomous, something that I could do and make—basically a whole composition, a whole orchestral arrangement—just on my own. I had known about modular synths for a while, and I had a couple non-modular synths that I was running through pedals and multi-track looping things and making these little soundscapes.

I was a part of this online forum for guitar pedals, ilovefuzz.com. There was a guy on there that was like, "I have a bunch of modular synthesizer stuff." I think I got three modules from him, or something. It was enough to start exploring that. The first time I even turned it on and started making sounds with it, I was like, "Yeah, this is the way that my brain works. This is gonna be good." I was like, "I found it." I found the format for the way that I like to create. I started down the rabbit hole with that.

I don't really know how modular synths work. I love the way they sound, but it seems there's a steep learning

curve. How did you figure your way around using them?

That was a big reason why I didn't go into it for so long: I really was afraid that I wasn't gonna be able to understand it. I would go online and read the manuals for things, or watch [YouTube videos](#) and I still wasn't understanding it. I was kind of defeated. It was like that feeling again of when I couldn't sing and play guitar at the same time: "Oh my god, I'm too dumb for this. I'm not gonna be able to learn this."

I just psyched myself up and started sitting down with it. There are a couple of very basic things that you can learn in five minutes, just the basic concepts. Then you just start patching outputs to inputs and there's really not that much that can go wrong. That's how I learned, and I think that's how a lot of people learn. I think that most people who are using modular synths are really just winging it, and learning as they go along.

The other thing about modular is that it goes along with the way you learn it. You use it based on your style of creation. That's the biggest draw to it for me. It's not a program that's designed to be used in a specific way for a specific type of music; it's a completely blank slate. Modules sometimes will have little niche features that were made with some kind of techno music in mind, or some kind of time ratio division, [but] for the most part it's these basics, and you can create music the way that you naturally would just make it.



You've described your process with ambient music as organic and meditative, and that it often has a mind of its own. Was that why synths appealed to you?

When I write songs for Florist, it's so structured. That was my world, that was my relationship with music for a

long time. But when I started making music with modular synths, I realized that I can make something that's just completely unstructured. That's what I like about it. I didn't come to the modular looking for something that would make music that's perfectly in-time, perfectly in-tune, that I could cut up and paste in sections and have this complete nice and clean composition. I was really, really attracted to the philosophy of it. It is truly about existing without any sort of structural guidelines.

That seems really nice and freeing. Because it's unstructured, how do you know when a song is finished?

I think that's probably the easiest thing. This music that I make every day, this ambient music, is really from a place of pure intuition, and that's also part of my practice with this art form as a part of my life. I tend to live my life in a very intuition-based way. If I feel really, truly inside of me and around me that there are forces telling me "yes" or "no" about something, I can't go against whatever that feeling is. That's what's led me to where I am now, every decision I ever made.

Ending a song is the same way. I just listen and when it feels like it's ready to stop, I just fade it out. I record a lot of stuff that, when I'm done with it, I just delete it. Or it sits on my computer and then I delete it, or it just never really feels right. When something is done and it feels right, it's just pretty much immediate. That's what I go by, that's what I listen to. Just a feeling, really.

Does it stress you out to delete stuff?

It can. I can be in different headspaces with it. I can be in a headspace where I'm trying to accumulate a lot of material because I feel like I need it for something. That's usually not what's correct for me to do; it's usually correct for me to be just be making music for the sake of making it, and then once I have something that feels right, it usually comes about in a pretty natural way and then I save it.

When I delete music, it usually feels good. Because if I'm even considering deleting it, I think that means that there's just no way that I wanted it. It's just letting go of some kind of archive of permanence, of the fact that I have these recordings saved as a back-up or something, but I think it's in my best interests to keep filtering out stuff like that. I actually just got a new computer because my old one died. It feels like the first computer I've ever had as an adult. It has nothing on it, and every time I download something, every time I add something to it, I'm like, "Do I want this to be on there forever? Or do I just delete it?" I'm deleting a lot of stuff and it feels really good to keep everything clear, to have that lack of clutter.

A big part of being a musician these days is inhabiting all of these online spaces. I admire the way that you write about your work online, whether it's the [description of an album on Bandcamp](#), or [a little note on Instagram](#). How do you approach this whole world of being a musician and having to have an online presence?

It's interesting to always be thinking about how you have to not, essentially, disappear, and I am somebody who really, really, really wants to just disappear. I think that my process, my method for using social media and the internet for self-promotion, is really just to use it as sort of humbly as I can, and just use it to be as true to myself as I can.

The things that I make already have so much of me in them—my being, my emotions—that's being communicated to people, whether I say something or not. For me, saying, "This is what I felt about making this. This is what was happening when I made this," that's just part of the piece, and I think it is a way for people to feel their own permission to become a little bit more vulnerable and open themselves up to feeling the feelings that we can get from music.

It's like sharing that I feel emotions, and I feel sad, and I struggle with all the kinds of things that every person struggles with. That's what this music came from. Or this music came from a period of really great celebration, or whatever—that is just the truth and I don't want anybody to think that doesn't happen, or that I have some kind of presence to maintain that is removed from a "normal" existence, because that's just not true.

I want to share my music because I think it's for everybody. I made it, but it came from being alive, and everybody's alive. I think that is the duty of an artist: not to have your music be your thing to show off, but your thing to share, and your thing to be like, "Hey, life made me feel this way. We're all doing this together. We all have experiences that are from the same energy source." I think that any way that I can translate that into music that can be shared, and taken with you throughout the day or at any time when you're feeling upset, that is what I feel is really the most important thing.

I'm curious, what's your relationship with singing?

Well, I definitely don't think I'm a singer, but I sing because I feel like it is the most direct way to communicate musically, those kinds of specific things with lyrics. Singing is really, on an emotional level, pretty difficult usually. When you're saying words out loud that you're writing and that are coming from your heart or your mind, but maybe you haven't been really saying them to yourself, that's always really... It's alive.

I write songs with lyrics a lot less than I write instrumental music. I have to prepare. I have to suit up before I go in there because I know that it's gonna be intense. I always feel amazing afterwards, but I have to be ready, and it definitely comes in waves.

What makes you feel ready?

Usually it's spending an extended period of time with my shell on. It's usually around six months—sometimes more, sometimes less—but a handful of months spent just, for my own protection, not being able to look directly in the face of that kind of radiating black orb in your mind that represents all the things that you don't want to face directly. Ignoring that for long enough, to the point where I know that I am finally [ready to] let it in and feel it. It's hard but then it always is over and I feel better after.

You're coming out on the other side of a big transition: you're closing a chapter by putting out a new album, *Mount Vision*. Your computer died and now you have a new one. You're working on a new Florist album. What kinds of things are you thinking about that you want to start exploring?

Usually the timeline is: I start [a project], I'm really excited, I work really hard, I completely start over and completely start from scratch at least once. Then, I think it's great, then have a period of, "This is not good. I'm not getting any joy from this. What am I doing?" Then there's the breaking point, which is the final stage of it, where maybe I start over again, or maybe I just come back to it in a fresher way and [feel] really, really happy and excited, and I'm clearly seeing the work that I put into something.

Whatever happens, it always is this cycle and, at the end of it, I have that feeling of release. I can wake up the next morning and just do whatever I want. I don't feel like I have to start working immediately to finish something. It's this huge release. Then usually within a couple of days I become completely obsessed with some new concept, or some new way of making music.

I can't really stop making music. I've tried at different points in my life to start following a different path, and every time that happens, it's like I get pulled right back.

I think I have kind of handed myself over, in a certain way, to the universe, in the sense that I really just am following some kind of feeling that this is what I'm supposed to be doing. That is the basis for everything I've ever decided to do.

The most important thing, for me, is that the things that I make, when I'm making them, are really helping me, but their life *after* that is out in the world. I really, really want them to be for everybody else, and not me anymore. And then I just continue on and do my own new wave of living and coping and whatever.

Emily A. Sprague recommends:

Fiddler's Green Peculiar Parish Magazine: A beautifully made publication about life and magic and leading a

magical life.

Raum by H. Takahashi: An album by one of my favorite contemporary composers that he made on his phone while walking around Tokyo. Intention > tools.

Name

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Vocation

Musician

