On how friendship fits into the creative process

Musician Erin Birgy discusses being intentional in all you do, finding your calling, and how friends have always moved her creativity forward even during darker periods.

August 9, 2021 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2521 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Mental health, Inspiration, Process.

When you were supposed to start recording *Life, and Another* [in a small cabin in New Mexico], you found yourself dissociating from reality. How did you reckon with being creatively stuck in the middle of nowhere?

Creatively, I don't feel like I was stuck in the middle of nowhere, but I *was* physically stuck in the middle of nowhere. I was like, "It's not important to be writing right now." I was just trying to go see my closest friends, [who] are in Albuquerque. So it was like a four-hour round-trip drive to get coffee with somebody, and [I'm] really dependent on friendships and relationships. I don't think that's a bad thing, but it was a lot harder to access.

I think at some point, I was like, "Wow! I'm really here alone, and what are the things that make me okay?" We had this funny little white shag rug, and I'd sit in the middle of that and play guitar for a long time. I knew that the guitar kept me [grounded]. That's not even my main instrument, but 10 minutes a day feels like taking a tea pill that calms you down a little bit. I started doing that all through the night because I was really afraid of the dark alone, and I was really afraid of the desert and whatever might follow me home.

I'm curious how friends and their presence tie into your ability to be creative.

[Friends are] the [purest] form of support. They're just my family, and they're kind of like what I always imagined. I see a lot of my friends' blood relatives, and they are very supportive. They're like, "Oh my god! What are you doing? This is incredible. This is so cool." They're really invested in it and repost stuff, and…I get that from my friends. I've had many of my friendships, even within Mega Bog, for much over a decade.

My mom always says…"You surround yourself with incredible people, and I don't know how you do this. They're all so good to you." I feel really lucky for that, [and] they inspire what I'm going to get into next or how I'm going to react to things. I can be my pure self, and they can react to me, and I can learn from that. For the most part, it's a really healthy, beautiful cycle of being there for one another, just having a really strong community and family. It was strange to not be [physically] close to anybody for a while.

How do you know when the friends you're making should become not just muses, but full-on collaborators?

I just have a feeling when I meet somebody, and I meet a lot of people through their own showcases, maybe playing a show, or just in a social situation where they feel good and warm, or they send me something. But I feel like, with most of these people that I'm still really close with after 15 years, it was just this instant instinctual

thing. I've tried to force that with some people I didn't have the actual spark with because they seemed cool or nice. It doesn't mean they're not those things, but…at this point, it's pretty easy to tell when I'm forcing it, and I don't force it anymore. It's something that is pretty mystical, or they just appeared. We had appeared to one another, and then [we] commit on some level.

I'm curious how where you were in New Mexico resembled where you typically write and record your songs. What did it have or not have that you're used to in other spaces where you've been creative?

Whenever I'm starting to write a batch of songs, which usually turns into a record, I have a lot of alone time. Right now, I have a lot of alone time, but I'm sleeping really well. That hasn't been my norm for any of my life up until this point…The physical space [for this record] was…loneliness and not being able to sleep. I couldn't sleep until the light started coming up or I could hear the birds. And then I felt safe to do it, but creating that safety for yourself, there's more obvious ways I see now than just staying awake and trying to write music and spinning out. That's been a constant thing, whenever I do start writing a batch of songs. It's just all through the night, baby let's go.

What does a safe recording space look like for you? What does a safe writing space look like for you?

When I write, I'm pretty manic and coming from a place of [being upset] about something. The safe recording space is that family community coming together and honoring all that I've gone through. And then being able to honor all the things they've learned and are bringing, and we basically camp out and summer-party for like three weeks and get very close and very strange.

I feel very safe with all the people that I play with. Sometimes I feel like, "Oh, maybe this is shitty." …[My friends] are really good at banishing that insecurity or walking [me] through it.

I love a studio that has places to sleep and places to clean your body. I'm learning how to take care of myself now without abandon without touring. Before, most of my care was projected onto the people in my band, and I could eat because I was feeding them, or I could go to sleep because they needed sleep. And that just felt really good and does feel really good.

I've occasionally been hearing birds chirping in the background wherever you are. You've mentioned something about birds where you were for the recording, and listening to [your music] over the years, there's a lot of natural imagery. So I'm curious how much surrounding yourself with nature helps you to be creative.

How much? Completely. I'm actually in my cactus garden right now. It's really important for me to not think of it as where I live versus nature or how the natural parts seep out of city life. It's really important to think of it as one ecosystem and being able to visit different edges of it and realize it's all affected by the same action.

I live in Los Angeles now, but the big reason I came here from New York was [that] it's very easy to drive to the mountains. It's a 10-minute drive to be out of a smog pit. It's very easy to go to the ocean or just swim in a creek without having to pay $60 in tolls and swim through a bed of trash. It's important.

I'm curious how you started the project that became *Life, and Another* when you were feeling so disconnected from your creative process. Similarly, I'm curious, how did you discover and connect with the practices that reconnected you to your creativity?

That record started like a really desperate necessity. I'm always building up material. Everything we do is an act of creativity or a practice of art-making, even if you're not an artist.

It was just getting to a point where—and this is how it almost always happens to me—where I have the notebooks, I have the voice [memos], I have things that are broken pieces building up for a long time. Maybe they're not broken pieces—they were like a sourdough starter or something, it's just getting more and more. When I need it, because

I don’t feel like I can stay in my humanity or in my sanity, I have those little pieces that are my anchors.

So then, when I can finally accept that I have something special, I can reach in and start taking pieces and let all this energy that I’d been letting be free start flow[ing]. When that happens, it’s pretty easy…the gate is open and it’s all coming out.

A lot of [my] songs [are about] looking around and being really present and mindful. Desperately trying to be mindful, looking around the house and remembering objects and feelings associated with…the material I surround myself with, or all the bugs that I had to make peace with.

Because there was a lack of humans surrounding me, I was desperately forcing the connections that obviously are already real. Often, I’m like, “Oh, there’s a spider, I’ll put it outside.” This time it was, “There’s a spider. This is the only thing that is moving the way that I’m moving in this space. I need to reckon with it and think about [it] in a new way.” That’s a really easy way to find words and song material.

I’ve read that mindfulness, attachment theory, dialectical behavior therapy, and even anger have helped you to feel creative. Can you tell me more about that?

I’ve always been really angry. I was really angry at the romantic relationship I was in, but I didn’t understand how to recognize the anger. I was just like, “Something’s wrong with me and this other person.” I went off the deep end on self-diagnosing. I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. I don’t always relate to [it], but I do pull strings from [it] sometimes [to] organize my thoughts. I think a lot of my time where I wasn’t noodling on guitar or trying to listen to an audiobook, I was gone in the self-help internet loop and trying a lot of different things.

My mom had given me…a dialectical behavioral therapy workbook. I thought it was so stupid because the first thing is, when you’re manic, don’t gamble, don’t have sex, don’t leave the state, don’t do all these things. I was like, “This is like my life. I love this. I love casinos, touring all the time. Eight months out of the year, I need to run away.” It sat with me for a long time. It was this very stupid notion to even start monitoring myself. It offended me, but I had that book when I was out there, and I had a lot of other books.

I was trying to mix all of these things in one pot without having a guide or a therapist. I would make classes for myself, and I’ve always done this with different things, but that was my class at the time: “What’s up with my mental health? Can I fix this myself or just start working towards something?”

I’m curious how all of that has played into your creativity and songwriting.

You’re asking questions like, “What is the key to [creativity]?” And I’m just like, “All of this.” It’s always happening all the time. I live in a way where I’m making something by having this conversation, but when I’m thinking about songwriting in particular, I had spun out a couple of times. We moved to L.A., and then a couple months later, we were like, “Well, we can’t find a dream house here right now. Let’s move to New Mexico.” And I was doing a lot of things that were triggering manic episodes.

I get really excited and happy and feel like I can do anything when I’m manic. I feel like I’m the best songwriter in the world [when I’m manic]. Even if I’m scared and in a dark place, I still am like, “Well, this is my calling. This is what I’m doing. I’m meant to deliver all of this work. I was supposed to be.” I always just go back to it and not because it’s… I’m realizing now it’s soothing, but I’ve just had a lot of major complex things my whole life.

When I started writing and sharing music, that was the process of feeling, “This is my purpose. This is how I’m going to create positive change. This is how we’re going to be a happy and just society one day. This is my contribution.”

One of the threads through what you’re talking about is curiosity. What does your curiosity look like, and how do

you explore things?

I have a lot of unconditional love that makes it possible to wonder about anything at all. It's strange to know that you want to be curious and explore but not totally have a good role model for that, or structure.

I've never been inspired by famous explorers, but I'm really into *Star Trek*, and I feel like that became a good role model. A lot of philosophical ideas of how to explore without interference, and how interference is pretty much inevitable because you just start affecting things [with] every choice you make.

I want to circle back now to community and people. How did other people or collaborators figure into your work as you were coming out of the isolation that preceded *Life, and Another*?

They were never really gone. I had people. These people were picked out already as my best friends. So they were part of the process and the conversation. I wasn't technically alone. I had James [Krivchenia, of Big Thief] and Zach [Burba, of iji] always on the line. I talked to everybody about the music.. to make myself feel less isolated. It's like, "Oh, I have this loneliness, so I'm glad to reach out. I'm going to tell people I'm starting a record, so we can start making plans to be together again."

And then, I worked really hard to get all the basic material to present to people. I [was] also sending it to them as I made it to see what they thought and whether they had contribution ideas. So they're part of the process the whole time, even if we're not in the same place.

What was most helpful and most challenging about working with others as you exited your physical isolation?

[During recording], there were so many people in the studio all the time. I wanted everybody to be part of it and have it be this great party, and it was, but [I had to ask myself], "Are we going to do all of the ideas, or am I going to take a little control?" And it's hard for me to direct so many people, because they all have great ideas. The hardest part was being able to make the call and ask for space.

It was a little chaotic, because it was truly a big party for a long time and less focused. We [could] snap into it and do the song. There were some songs where it was like, "Oh, we maybe don't need this person on this track, or we need you to play a different instrument." I feel a little sensitive asking people to do things outside their comfort zone, even though that's something we all get a lot out of [from] this band.

Erin Birgy Recommends:

Bursera microphylla

Vampire Lore by Jan Louis Perkowski

Dioscorea elephantipes

Acupuncture

One-on-one time

Name
Erin Birgy

Vocation
Musician (Mega Bog)

Adam Gundershiemer