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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2933 words.

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# On showing up where you are needed

Musician Fabiola Reyna (Reyna Tropical) discusses rethinking your projects and knowing when to stop, on learning to trust your intuition, and saying yes when opportunities are calling.

**How was the experience of growing up on the border with Mexico? When did you realize that you wanted to be an artist?**

I was born in Cancun, Mexico, and raised there for about six years. My mom's side of the family is from Reynosa Tamaulipas, and then the bordering city of Reynosa is McAllen, Texas. And then I moved to Austin, but I don't recall a time necessarily where I was like, "I want to be an artist." I started playing guitar when I was nine in Austin, and I think I just knew the guitar was my tool to express myself, that it was the only way that I could make myself understood, the only way that I could say what I wanted to say, that was my voice, and I didn't think that that was being an artist until I was maybe 15. What shaped my need to express and my need to create as a tool, as my voice was being raised by a single mom, and as an only child throughout Mexico and Texas.

**How was the process of discovering the guitar, and learning to play it? Are you self-taught, or did you take any classes?**

I went to a camp that was called Natural Ear Music Camp, so I learned by ear. Then I would just learn different classic rock songs by ear, so I was self-taught in the way that I taught myself how to write music, and I was self-motivated. The process of discovering the guitar wasn't that fun, because I came to the guitar during a time when it wasn't culturally acceptable for girls to play, especially lead guitar, which is what I prefer. There were a lot of obstacles and a lot of times when I wanted to stop playing because it wasn't fun. It took a lot of miracle moments for me to stay with it, and eventually find a community to want to be a part of.

**You funded She Shreds Magazine. What was the main motivation to fund that project?**

The first time that multiple of my worlds came together, which was like my anger, my desire to express through music, and also my desire for community support, was at the Girls Rock camp in Portland, Oregon. My mom drove me out there when I was a teenager, and that's when I learned about women's impact in music history, it was the first time I saw women play, and I got to ask other women questions, and beyond women, women of color, too. It was a point where I realized like, "This actually exists, and we exist. It's just very, very hidden." I wanted to create She Shreds, because up until that point, I felt alone in music-making, and in looking for, again, support and community. I wanted to make She Shreds as a space to help other women and women of color find community and resources that are taught by other women.

**Running a magazine also comes with the business side of it. How was the process of managing both the editorial and the operational side of it?**

The idea for the magazine came when I was 18, and it took until I was 20 or so years old to finally put an issue out. That took organizing a festival, raising money, and bringing volunteers together to write and photograph, edit, and illustrate the magazine. The process of putting the magazine together was new for me. I didn't go to college, this was my college.

There was so much learning that I was just fascinated, excited, and determined. Going and finding financial support, I'd never done that before. I was so passionate about She Shreds and this needed to exist. I think the first five years were just like, "Wow. I'm learning so much about myself, and I'm learning so much about marketing, and business, and fundraising," but really it's just because this magazine had never really been done before, I was able to just do it my way and in collaboration with other artists and other musicians. That was really fun. As things started to get more business-oriented,

the magazine had already been around for 10 issues or so, and we had gotten established with brand partnerships.

It started to get a little bit more boring. It wasn't learning anymore. It was just repetition, and doing the same things. That's what burned me out. For me, the most fun parts were when I didn't know anything, and then once I started to know, and I started to just do the same things, I lost interest. It didn't feel like it was doing anything new. That's when I decided to stop, because if I'm not doing something that's actually changing a need or filling a gap or something, then I'd rather stop and rethink why this needs to exist, and then come back to it when it's needed again.

**It's not easy to say, "Okay, this is enough," particularly, when it's something that you put so much effort into it.**

Luckily, for me there are so many things that I do, there are so many outlets, and Reyna Tropical is an extension of *She Shreds*. They're sisters. So, it's not like I'm not doing *She Shreds*. It's just that I'm doing it another way. Reyna Tropical will, and is, inspiring me, and giving me a different perspective to come back to *She Shreds* in a way that is refreshing and new, and needed by people today.

I've also just learned why rush it? Why force it? Just give it the time it needs, and it'll come back, and it'll feel really good, rather than come at it when you're burnt out, and you don't have anything to give, and you're just dehydrating yourself.

**How did you start to feel comfortable with singing and being a frontwoman onstage?**

It was all difficult for me. I didn't want to do any of it, singing or being a frontwoman, and it was really awkward at first. I didn't know how to move, and I was really shy, and I was really in the back, hiding behind Sumo. But as the guitar for me was less about being artistic and more about expressing, and my voice started to become that intuitively, so I didn't have a choice, because I started to get to know myself through that process.

I think that the theme between the guitar, *She Shreds*, and singing is all three of these things have taught me so much about myself, have brought me so much education, internally, and externally, about the world, and have brought me to different communities and have allowed me to learn what the people need, what the people want, and that feels important for me, as my way of connecting in my lifetime.

That's what singing was starting to do, it was starting to guide me, and I just had no choice. I think it was maybe summer 2021, after the pandemic that we played a show in LA, and everyone knew the words, and it was just this new energy, and it brought me into my huge frontperson personality.

From then on out, I needed that energy, I needed that complete release, so that's what I tried to channel onstage, and that's what I still do now. But it took at least five years to get there with Reyna Tropical. I'm still working, vocally, on being confident. It's still a process, but I think I have a clear vision of where I want to go.

**From what you are saying, it also seems like your intuition guided you to also be with the flow.**

Right, which is a scary thing to trust. In my experience, it guides you and lands you in places, where you can't quite consciously make those decisions. You just have to say yes, follow it, and trust.

**How do you think that trust also comes into creating music?**

I think any relationship that we have with each other. For me, connecting with people is important, because it sets the foundation for how my relationship with everything else is going to be, with animals, with the Earth, with water, with everything, and I feel like music is a relationship.

It's one of my deepest, most intimate relationships, and it's the language that I feel like I can connect to my ancestors with. I feel like that music is sort of the direct translation of my intuition, and all of the different communications that happen through that ancestrally, and subconsciously.

I just feel like everything about music is about trust, and it's about not knowing what's going to come through, it's about not knowing how it even is formed, or where it's even coming from, and you just have to trust that when it comes through, you have to say yes, and even collaborating with people. I can meet you for 10 minutes, and just feel a trust there, and we can write, but if I don't, it's not going to come through, it's not going to flow, and it's not going to be offered to the people in the most transformative way. I need to trust the collaborator, but, also, to spend time on the land, and spend time with the people of that land, so that it's reciprocal. It's not just me needing to trust them, or it. It's it and them needing to trust me too.

**How do you know when you are done with writing a song or an album?**

I need pressure, I need deadlines. I need a little bit of chaos to make it all come together and be released. Otherwise, I'm just going to keep trying to perfect it. That's always been the practice with Reyna Tropical write something for four hours, and then just release it right then and there. What you wrote is what you wrote. I guess the trust is just I'm going to trust that whoever needs to pick this up, whoever needs to receive this is going to, and if it works, it works, and if it doesn't, it doesn't. What

do I have to lose?

**When you toured with your first EP you sold out shows with no manager or marketing efforts. How was that experience?**

If it wasn't for people asking for it, or for things like that happening, I would have never followed up with Reyna Tropical. It wasn't my dream to be a singer or frontwoman. Because I was singing in this project, I didn't care to do it. I never really wanted to play live in it. It was just an experiment for intuitive expression, and it wasn't meant to be played live or anything.

Doors started to open. Bomba Estereo asked us to go on tour with them, and then they took us to Colombia, and then all kinds of things started to open up for Reyna Tropical, so it was clear that people wanted it, and so I diverted my attention to it. To us, selling out shows was just a testament of how important this music was, partly because of the drive that was coming through, but also [how important it was] to the people listening. It's another one of those things where it's like I feel like I didn't have a choice. That's what people were asking for, and that's the whole thing. I just listen to what the people want, and if they don't want it, then I'm not going to do it.

**You just mentioned that back then doing music with Reyna Tropical was not your dream. You recently released a new album with this project titled Malegria. Are you in a place where this is your dream?**

I'm in a place where I'm completely open to the possibilities and what the opportunities are to come from it. I could go either way. I'm prepared for it to not be received, and for it to not be distributed, or for it not to be loved, and I can change my life, and go to the beach, and do whatever if that doesn't happen, but I'm also prepared for it to be extremely well-received, and for the doors to open for this to be my life, for the rest of my life.

This is my dream because my dream is to connect with people through music, to investigate diasporic experiences, to research history as it's impacted by Black and brown people, and to tell that truth. My dream is also to continue to create spaces where Black and brown people and Indigenous folks and women can feel their most potent potential. My dream is to create those spaces, and I think I believe that Reyna Tropical and Malegria are here to do that. If they do that, then that will be my dream fulfilled, to just create bigger and bigger spaces with those visions, and that ethos in mind. But if that doesn't happen, then I'll just try something else.

**You are describing a mindset where you are open to possibilities. I wonder if under this vision there is room for expectations or to think about failure.**

The biggest failure would have been to not have done it, because that was a possibility. If this album wasn't coming out right now, I would have felt like I missed an opportunity. This album, for me, is the most accurate expression of what I went through the last four years, and, for me, it couldn't have been a better album—for what I wanted to say to myself, for the documentation that I wanted to have for this moment—it couldn't have been better.

I am so extremely happy about being able to have done that, to be able to have expressed it so accurately, for myself, period. That's the biggest success I could have ever possibly had. Whether people want to write about it, or want to listen to it, or whatever, is all extra. I'm excited when people want to listen to it, and I'm super excited when people receive it in the way it was meant to be received, and that's like, "Wow, I can't believe that people can pick up on that." And, "Wow, how powerful of a communication tool music is when people who don't even know me know exactly what I'm saying." But, there's no failure in it because I created the perfect thing for myself.

**Your bandmate Sumo died in 2022. In one of your recent Instagram posts, you mentioned that this album is a story about your loss and grief, and along the way, you felt a kind of imposter syndrome as well. How was the process of going through this grief, the collaboration that existed between you and Sumo, and creating this album without him?**

When someone so close to you passes away, someone that, especially, you were dedicating your whole life to, and it was all very weaved together, the question, inevitably, comes. Maybe you don't even have to be that close. I just think when something so great like grief comes through, one of the first questions is, "Who am I without this person? What am I capable of without this person? Am I capable of it? Of anything?" I just got completely filled with insecurities, because I didn't really know what life could be like without him. I had to start over in a lot of ways. It's interesting because I had that confidence before he passed away of, "This is who I am. This is what I do," but for whatever reason, when he passed away and the grief came, I, all of a sudden, just felt like I needed him so badly.

It just took time to come back to myself, to who I am, and to not be completely enveloped by the grief, and it was a huge opportunity for a rebirth. It was like you were zapped completely clean slate, and it was like being lost in that empty room, and being like, "Wait, this doesn't look familiar," but then being able to bring in elements, redecorate the room, and not bring in the things that you didn't want. My insecurities just came from grief. I don't even know if they were mine. I think it was what grief does to somebody.

**What excites you about the future?**

I'm grateful to be in a position where people are interested in listening to me, so I'm excited to get my

words, and my expression more and more concise, so that I can say things in a way that people can receive them, and it's more accessible. I'm in this place where I have no idea what the future brings, and I love that feeling. I love not knowing. But in the meantime, I'm just going to keep studying, practicing, and learning, so that when those opportunities come, my words come, and I can be ready to connect with people.

**Reyna Tropical recommends:**

Herban Cura Herbal CSA

Being mindful about our plastic consumption and finding alternative ways to consume, sustainable for our everyday life (reusable glass, stainless steel, bamboo utensils)

We Are Owed by Ariana Brown

Oaxaca The Talk for Education on Mezcal

Giving compostable offerings (plants, honey, presence) to a body of water you frequent

Name

Fabiola Reyna

Vocation

musician, guitarist, singer, songwriter

Fact

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Devyn Galindo

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