On staying open to interpretation

Musician Jana Horn discusses collaborating with memory, working hard to feel inspired, and giving away what was given to her.

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As told to Laura Brown, 2299 words.

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How do songs come to you, or how do you know when they're arriving?

Ideally, a song appears kind of like a ghost that you make eye contact with and hope it doesn't fly away or dissolve at any minute. And then there's just the work of songwriting, which for me is sitting down with a guitar and basically meditating on a few notes. I'll just pick a couple notes and let A and G or whatever oscillate until words and melodies move through them. In the best case, it's not a very conscious process, it's a very intuitive and exciting thing. But you can't count on that. You can't just count on a ghost to enter the room. If I'm stuck, sometimes I'll just say words until something makes sense, like I'm accidentally coherent in some way. I think I just described at least three different ways that I work on music. It'd be cool if songs were always arriving in a divine way, but that's just not the world we live in necessarily. Or it's not the world I inhabit all the time.

I feel like memories are always present in your songs, like they're almost speaking back to you. How do you work with memory as a collaborator?

I guess the first thing that comes to my mind is that memory is so malleable. You really can play with it because it's so subjective, and the way you remember something is different now than it was after it first happened. Your question is interesting. Do memories remember us, too? Why am I remembering something right now? Is it because that memory is also doing work with me? Is it collaborating with me?

"Go on, move your body," for example, is an old song that I had no intention of putting on the [new] record, but your idea that memory is a collaborator resonates because I remembered it for some reason. What do you do with a memory once it's remembered in a completely different context, which is now? So now I have this memory, which is not what it was, but what it is. I mean, I wrote a song sort of about this. There's a song called "After All This Time" on my last record, which goes: "Remembering is not the same as looking back, windows I pass along the way." I was thinking about memory and how you don't actively remember a lot of the time. Memories come back to you, a lot of the time, or can be visited in these spaces that they occupy without you, once they've been created… It feels really natural to bring memory into a song because it's so in and of itself creative. It's not a fixed thing and can be reinterpreted and made into art and remade into other art. Different songs can be about the same memory and they can be completely different.

Do your songs ever feel like poems to you? There's something about your lyrics where it looks like they're also meant to be on the page.

There are some songs that I think of as poems and others not as much. I don't really set out to write lyrics in any particular way. It's more about whatever outfits the song best… But, like a poem, I am working word to word

most of the time. Once one word comes out, letting the next word follow that word—as opposed to coming with some sort of story to tell. I work on a pretty granular basis, like a poem. Or sometimes on an image basis—again, like a poem. So I think my approach is similar to the approach of writing a poem, but I don't know if it always comes out that way. Sometimes things just become. I don't try to be too controlling when I'm writing.

What is the most important element or piece in making music for you?

It definitely is, for me, about connection. Definitely. How I started writing music was by offering it to someone, and their reception of it was ultimate for me. It meant everything. It meant whether the song *was* a song or the song *was not* a song. Now it's about connection in the process of writing it, and about connection in the performance of it. The recording and the product of it is… I mean, it's necessary, but it's not important to me from a personal standpoint. I get a lot of energy from performance and the audience-artist relationship, and being able to experience it simultaneously with others and connect with this bigger thing together.

I want to talk about your songs and what I gather from them. I was talking to Dan Wriggins recently about pacing in songs, and how a line is revealed, and what's going through a listener's head as bits and pieces are given to them. I think about that with your songs too, but in a completely different way. Your pacing feels less like filling in a blank and more like taking a breath or adding a comma. How do you think about the space you leave in songs?

You win the Unique Question Award. I do think space and silence are really important to me in life, as well as in song. There are plenty of my own songs where I can hear the lack of space and the kind of claustrophobic-ness of them. That's why I have a sort of conflicting relationship with recording, because once the songs have their clothes on and are all looking a very particular way, they're just different than the loose and natural thing that they were with me.

I feel like space and silence are opportunities for connection. Silence in a performance is a moment that is shared in a way that noise and words are not. You're listening and one person is talking, but if it's silent, it's shared. Does that make sense? It offers some room. I mean, that is what it is. Space is room. I feel like you can hear if a song is open or if it's closed and really committed to its intention or whatever. Whereas I'm intending or hoping to leave a song open—for it to be yours, as opposed to, "Please hear what I have to say, and don't put yourself into it."

Definitely. On the new album, I was hearing the way a line opens and it feels like something's being released, and then it pulls back or it lets it contradict itself. It's almost like touching something to see how it responds. Like the line, "I miss you, I don't." Do you think that you play with that tension?

Certainly. I've never put it in the words that you have or thought about it that way, but I certainly don't think life is very coherent or easy… I am wanting there to be conflict in the song, as there is conflict in all things.

Something I love about your work is how often abstract concepts like experience or patience get personified. I'm curious how you communicate and interact with those forces or ideas when you're writing.

I mean, so many of these songs were written in just a state of surrender and hope for connection to something, or word from something. So the personification of them is obviously an artistic liberty. But it's true that I was seeking response from memory, from experience, from the offering of patience. Like, "If I offer this much patience, what will I get in response? If I sit here for long enough, will I receive a word?" The answer I felt like I was getting was you have to do more than that. You can't just sit there and wait. There has to be more exercise involved. Which goes back to your first question. You get these kind of miracle songs, and despite the knowledge that they were miraculous, you believe it'll happen again or that it'll happen a lot. But inspiration takes work.

A lot of these songs were written in an attempt to connect with these things that are immaterial, and with instructors that I think are here to help us. But a lot of times it's more physically demanding than just really, really earnestly hoping to hear from these things.

I want to touch on visuals a little bit, because I feel like your lyrics move in a way that never quite settles. The image I see is of someone taking a spoon and stirring a liquid in a glass.

I like that a lot.

Can you talk a little bit about creating your album covers and what you try to convey through album artwork?

If I'm being honest, the visual aspect of my work is very difficult for me… My first idea for this album cover was for it to be a picture in the desert where it was made. So that was a very intentional decision. But in general, I find the translation process between music and the artwork to be really difficult. I'm not a visual artist. It's really hard, honestly. I wish you could put your music through a machine and it would spit out the thing that it should look like. But it's just a part of the process that is really hard. I do a lot of my own art for stuff, and I've also had other people do it, too. And it's like trying to speak a language I don't know. It doesn't come naturally to me at all.

Do you feel like the covers convey something that's present within the album, once they're complete?

I do. They have personal meaning to me, and so I can identify with them in that way, but it's extremely hard for me to see something and understand its objective relevance. I can see the desert in the image, and I know that that relates to the record and that is important to me. I can see the image of *Optimism* and how it was taken by this very dear friend of mine, who was very active in the whole process of making the album. And I can see *The Window Is The Dream* and how it was also made by a dear friend and how it conveys this particular song and all these things. I can see the thoughts and the threads, but I can't see the art itself.

Talking about visuals, I also wanted to mention that I love the video for "Go on, move your body" so much. It's charming, but it also adds this new dimension to the album. The thought I started carrying was the idea that love doesn't necessarily make things easier, but it changes the way that you see and move. Sometimes you don't realize that your hands can help someone reach something, when their hands are helping you dig down into something. Did you want that video to be a companion to the album in some way?

I did. I think that there's a way of listening to the songs where it just feels really heavy or something like that. But I don't think that's really true. I think that there's a lot of lightness and playfulness. I love the juxtaposition of that video and the song, but I also don't see it as juxtaposition, really. To me, it's in line. I love that and the way you put it: the hands reaching and the hands digging. The idea behind the video was that it's two people who've chosen to live this way, and so the relationship between them is co-creative, and lifelike, and co-conspiratorial as well. Just a sense of togetherness.

When the song "All in bet" came out, it felt like something I really needed to hear. What are you betting on these days?

What am I betting on? I guess I'm trying to live in a more fully fledged way. I think writing goes hand in hand with that. Writing can feel counterintuitive at times, because it implies will, intention, accessibility to yourself and others. It's combative, in a way. And it's really easy to want to be protective when things are so scary and overwhelming.

I think about the Parable of the Talents, where everyone is allotted some amount. $10, let's just say. And you don't want to lose your $10, so you bury it. You keep it safe. Meanwhile everyone else is going out with their $10 and spending it and increasing their wealth. So at the end of the day, someone has $100 and someone has $1,000 or whatever, and you still only have $10, because you were afraid to lose it. It feels increasingly important to me to give away what was given to me. Betting on… *life* is too big of a word, but it's true—or it's what I meant in the song and beyond. Betting on this thing that we're all here to do, and have to make the choice to keep doing—and to do well, hopefully.

I really agree with that idea. I have also been thinking about not always waiting for something to come back for

you, or giving and not expecting something in return.

Me too. It makes me think of this quote I think I heard in grad school about writing every day without hope and without despair. Giving without expectation—not easy.

Jana Horn recommends:

Packing your lunch

Always leaving one unwashed dish in the sink

Movies starring Sandra Hüller

Big Bend (currently under the threat of a border wall)

This cake

Name
Jana Horn

Vocation
musician