

On creating from a personal place



Musician Jess Shoman (Tenci) discusses creative work as an emotional outlet, growing organically, and balancing solitude with collaboration.

June 5, 2023 -

As told to Lauren Spear, 2285 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Mental health](#), [Collaboration](#).

Do you think you can inherit musicality?

Yeah, definitely. I think for me, I don't have any super musical family members that I've directly learned from, but I do have people in my family that I feel in some way or another have passed something down to me—maybe spiritually. I've been inspired by the way that my family members do things, and that's made its way into the way I make music.

Where do you think musical ability comes from?

I don't think it necessarily has to be learned. As I'm sure it is for most musicians, my music is very memory-based. I started writing music more as an emotional outlet, and I think that naturally lends itself to this outpouring of sound where you don't really know what to expect. You don't know what's going to come out of it. I certainly am not trained classically at all and don't know any music theory, I just write from the heart, as cliché as that sounds. I think it's almost better if you don't know that much because things come out in a way that can end up being more creative and don't sound the same as what everyone else is doing.

Because you write from a personal place, do you feel like you have to experience something in order to write about it?

I just recently started learning how to write a song and not be completely heartbroken or sad or have it come from a place of pain. It took me a long time to be able to sit down and write a song about just a topic or something that's a little more lighthearted. When I first started writing songs, it was this kind of purging of all these emotions and things that have happened to me over time. Once I got most of that out, I feel like I was finally able to just be like, "Okay, I can just do this as an exercise and not like I'm writing a song from my diary."

Do you feel like there is a difference in what you're writing about between your first record *My Heart Is An Open Field* and the latest release, *A Swollen River, A Well Overflowing*?

Yeah, definitely. Back to the point of shifting the way that I write songs, I took the time to think about what I wanted to say and how to approach it in a way that wasn't the same as the first record. Because the first record, I think, was more of a blur of emotions. I was like, "What just happened?" The new record was definitely more intentional as far as the topics I wanted to write about and being careful about the instrumentation a little more.

This whole past couple of years of being in the pandemic, I've really been trying to reach deep within myself to find ways to seek rejuvenation and to make myself feel alive, basically. Everyone was hit hard emotionally, and I think I got super depressed and I was like, "I have the tools to make myself feel like I can change my mindset a bit." Even though I don't know if I fully reached this form of rejuvenation, it was definitely a good attempt. I think that the joy definitely comes through, especially when we're playing these songs live because not all of the songs are necessarily about some traumatic thing that happened to me when I was younger. They're more so about the concept or an idea of something. So yeah, it's definitely cool to see the difference between the two.

When I first heard your songs, I feel like your voice was what drew me in. It's very distinct and captivating, and it felt like the main character in the songs. Having had the opportunity to see you live, I was struck by your band dynamic and how everyone had a very distinct character and voice of their own, through their instruments. I would love to know more about how you guys found each other and what it's like to play music together.

I feel very lucky to have met all my band members organically. It was just me and a bassist back in 2018 and we had just started playing little DIY shows here and there, and Curt [Oren], who plays sax and flute and guitar, and any instrument possible, asked us to play a show in their basement because they had a little DIY house venue at the time. I ended up meeting [bassist] Izzy [Reidy], who's also in a band with Curt called Izzy True at that show. I was kind of aware of them in the music scene, and I really liked their music. Curt played saxophone and I feel like I had never really seen that instrument, surprisingly, in an indie band, but now I think it's definitely more popular. I met Joey [Farago], who's no longer drumming in the band, at a DIY show. So it was definitely all through the DIY circuit, which feels really good and organic.

I think as far as playing with them live, each of them has their own character and the way that they do things is very individualized. I don't know exactly what needs to be done to make a song come to life, aside from what I think sounds good and what emotions I want to evoke through the instrumentation. My favorite thing to do is just give them a general idea of what I want to evoke and the bare bones lyrics and guitar of a song, and just let them have complete freedom to come up with whatever they interpret the emotion of the song to be.

I've certainly tried it the other way and had an idea of what parts I want them to play and I feel like it always turns out to sound more genuine when they have the freedom to play and do what they're naturally good at doing. They all have their own music projects, and they're all so talented. I think that I would be doing them a disservice if I were like, "You have to do this in a certain way." So yeah, it's really fun. It's really fun to write music with your friends.

Is it you that's writing all the lyrics?

I do write the lyrics and most of the melodies unless anyone has suggestions as we go. But yeah, I do all the songwriting.

Is that a solitary process?

That process is definitely solitary, but I do think, once we start having time to write again, we plan to get together a little more and see how we can write songs together and how that changes things. I think especially for the first album, which I had already written before I brought these band members on, I was talking about things that I didn't necessarily want to be processing with anyone else but myself. I'm interested to see how it would be to work with someone else because I've never really done that before.

I think it would be hard for me to let go of the control of writing lyrics a certain way. It would be really good practice for me, and I would be curious. I think what would happen is that maybe the lyrics wouldn't be as deep as I wanted them to be or something, and they would be more fun and playful, which is not a bad thing at all. But that's just my relationship with my band mates, we're just very wacky and joking around all the time. I would be very surprised if we wrote something together that was super serious.

Do you separate the words from the music or do they always go hand in hand?

I think, recently it's been more fragmented. I'll write little snippets of things in my notes and then piece things together. The meaning reveals itself to me over time, which I think is really fun for me because it's putting together the puzzle pieces of my life or something. It's very interesting. For the first album, I was really just taken over by emotion, and a lot of the songs poured out. I would just sit down with my guitar and I'd have a song done in an hour which I think is pretty rare for me. I have to be in a certain type of mood for that to happen and I feel so mentally exhausted after writing like that, but it's also cathartic in a different way.

When I was writing the second album, there were a lot of songs that I really had to pull out, and I wasn't getting the same feeling as the first one. I was like, "Are these good? I'm not doing it in the same way and since it's taking me a lot longer to get a song out, do they feel forced?" It's hard to not always have that feeling and then you kind of question yourself as an artist, and you're like, "Okay, well, maybe that was my one moment."

Do you ever feel lonely at all in your songwriting practice, or is it just something personal and close to you?

It's something that feels personal and close to me. It's not something I ever really feel super lonely in. If anything, I feel it gives me an opportunity to embrace myself in a way that I wouldn't normally and look at things in a different light, which I don't know if I necessarily would be doing if I were writing with someone.

I think writing songs by yourself gives you answers to a lot of questions about yourself. As I said, I would be interested to see what happens if I were very consistently writing things, even if they're "bad." I don't necessarily always sit down with the intention to play something just for the sake of doing it. I'm always like, "We're sitting down. We're going to write a song. We're going to have a final product by the end of this." And I think maybe I would feel a little more fulfilled if I were able to incorporate it into my everyday life a little more.

What do you think constitutes a bad song?

For me, I think it's just more of a feeling of it not sitting well with me and not being able to enjoy it. I don't think there's such a thing as a bad song necessarily. I mean, there definitely are out there, but I think, it's just a gut feeling where I'll play it a few times and am like "That sucks. That feeling sucks." I think that's when it's bad for me.

Do you have a checklist either for yourself or when listening to other music where you're like, "This is what I'm looking for in a song"?

Not necessarily, but I think the something that I keep going back to is a strong, emotional vocal where I can really be pulled in by what they're trying to say. I think I like songs that naturally have a lot of space for all of the moving parts to show their face a little. I think when songs get too heavy-handed or the instrumentation blends together a little too well, I'm not necessarily drawn to it. I feel like I really seek out lyrics that I could just read as a poem. Growing up and mostly listening to CDs and having a lyric booklet, I really loved the experience of reading along with the song and miss doing that. It's fun. I think with vinyl, people don't always put the lyrics in there, and you have to go to your computer or your phone which kind of de-romanticizes it a little.

What is your relationship with your voice like?

Oh, I think that is the most important relationship for me musically. I really treat my voice as its own instrument. It allows me to interpret emotion in a way that I wouldn't be able to put into words.

It's hard to explain how that feels because you can put a name to most things, but I feel like singing is this very deep and guttural feeling. It tickles this part of my brain that not much else can do. I've been singing ever since I was a child, and it's my most natural form of instrumentation. I definitely appreciate the gift from whoever gave it to me.

Singing is the best thing in the world. I feel like it's so cool to get to know your own voice and see what it can do and how you can grow with it. I sang very differently when I was thirteen years old, and I feel like I was copying different people that I loved. As I grew older, I feel like I grew into a different version of my voice. It's really interesting to see how you morph as a person and I think a voice is just kind of an extension of that.

Jess Shoman Recommends:

Going birdwatching. I never feel more present or at peace.

Making something with your hands without any expectations.

Immersing yourself in home videos from your childhood.

Collecting cute little plushies and knick-knacks and placing them all around your home to experience little pockets of joy throughout your day.

Driving with the windows down on a sunny day and listening to the album *Crying Laughing Loving Lying* by Labi Siffre.

Name

Jess Shoman

Vocation

musician

□

Henry Jordan Smith