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As told to Maryam Said, 2523 words.

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On creating at your own pace

Musician June McDoom discusses not being afraid to work slowly, what it means to be a Black folk artist, and knowing when you're ready to put things out into the world.

You released a beautiful self-titled EP. When I first listened to it, I felt like I was in a dream world. Was that intentional? The way you've created this soundscape?

I don't know if it was explicitly intentional. I've had this funny thing in my head from when I first started to realize I liked music and I was thinking about things in music I was drawn to: I'm always drawn to the feeling where you're standing on a mountain top, like you're in a movie. It's in the back of my mind whenever I'm writing melodies or chord progressions.

I wanted to try to achieve a minimal project for the EP, but then, when I started working on it, it ended up stacking and becoming more layered. So, it unintentionally ended up turning into this whole other thing, this whole world of sound.

How do you generally approach songwriting?

I'm super weird about songwriting because I have a short attention span. It's really bad. I'm just now realizing how bad it is. I haven't been writing songs for the longest time. I started writing these songs for the self-titled EP in college. I was like, "Okay, I recognized that I want to write my own music and legitimize it in my own mind." So, I started to gather my songs in my head, but I didn't have that many songs.

Writing songs kinda scares me because I do have such a short attention span. I feel like anytime I sit down to write, it needs to be a song that I will put out eventually. I'm not one of those people who can have a pool of songs, and maybe the songs will come out or maybe the songs will just be in my book of songs and the world will never hear them. Since my attention span is short, I put so much pressure on the period of writing, and so I don't have that many songs from the past.

For the EP, every couple of days I would sit with my guitar for five minutes and chip away at the songs. Evan [Wright], who I collaborate with and write with, is a big part of the process because I would write the song then I'd show him the song and that would help make it a little more legitimate. It's nice to have friends you can show your songs to. [With a collaborator], I didn't have to overthink the song anymore. I would show it to him, we would play it together, and then it became a real song. And, now, I really love producing, too—that's my favorite part of the process in recording. Those are all my songs. [laughs] I have new songs that I'm working on now. It's expanding.

I also chip away, but everyone around me can sit down and finish a song in its entirety. Sometimes that can happen, but the attention span thing, I totally get. If I sit too long, I'll start getting tired, so I have to walk away.

I feel like my problem is that the burst of inspiration is so tiny or for such a short period of time. Lately what's been inspiring me is that I've been reading some books. The writers are incredible. They write so poetically. I'll read a line I admire and I'm like "Oh, okay." I'm trying to improve my lyrical writing, and that's been helpful.

It's been a particularly good inspiration because I feel like I've been overwhelmed by so much music and it's really nice to read and to read, especially, writers who use nature as metaphors. It's so cool to see

that done eloquently. I've been inspired by that. I'll read something small and be inspired for 5 minutes and then be like "Okay, I did something good today."

I wish I was like those songwriters who wrote songs once a week. That's amazing to me, but I'm like "One song a week? That's a lot of songs...There's a lot of weeks!"

Totally! They're like god's strongest soldier!

Yes! [laughs] But I think about how we were just talking about the soundscape thing. I tell people that when I was younger—and I think back to how I listened to music before I started studying [jazz] music theory—I always used to listen to the harmony first.

When I was younger I would listen to a lot of pop music and I never listened to the lyrics first. You know how there's a person who listens to the lyrics first? I've always been more naturally inclined to sounds and textures and stuff like that. So I think, when I write songs, I'm just really eager to get to that next phase of the process.

I'm starting to think about how I can make my lyrics as powerful as they can be because doing the June McDoom EP was weird. It was weird because we started by recording at home and not very formally. When I started recording the songs, the lyrics were scrap lyrics so we would get to a pretty good version of a demo and I'd be like "This song is really weird and the lyrics aren't making any sense and the melody isn't really right." So then, I'd have to re-do it all because I had to change the song.

For my next project, I'm trying to figure out how I can be more efficient and actually finish the song. I want to make sure the song is good, but the song doesn't need to be perfect. I just need to make sure that everything is intentional.

I'm really clinging to that, where you said "the lyrics versus the production of the song." The production one doesn't get the same, for lack of a better term, respect? Outside of the emotional resonance of the lyrical content, the music itself can produce such a strong feeling and a certain memory you can cling onto. This ties into my next question: Your vocal approach is so unique. I wanted to know how you knew, or how you came about, navigating your vocals for this EP?

Oh, thank you! I wanted to add on one thing about what you said about how people put lyrics over the other elements of a song. For a long time, that messed with me because when I was in college and I was starting to write songs and I was showing them to other song writer friends, like mentors and teachers and stuff like that, everyone was like, "Your lyrics need to be perfect!"

I took a class on Bob Dylan and that era of folk writing and I was like, "This is true poetry," and "These are real literary creators." I was like "Ahh, I can't write a song." I would be really hard on myself and vocally say "I'm bad at writing songs." But I feel like when you hear a very beautiful chord change or something, it's like looking at a really cool painting. It's just a different thing and one can be stronger at [music production]. For a long time, it did mess with me because I was like, "I don't know how to write songs."

I think some people are really good at creating a vibe and there are some songwriters where I'm like "I have no idea what they are saying and I don't care," like Cocteau Twins, and you're just vibing. I feel that way when I listen to your music.

That's so cool! [laughs] Okay about the vocal thing... I didn't really know what I wanted and I just had these really general ideas in my mind about things that I liked and how they sounded in a really broad sense. Then, one day I found this vocal recording of this song that Bobbie Gentry sings. I can't remember the name right now, but it's from an album from the late '60s. The vocal sounds like it's coming from a radio; there's no effects on it and it's really dry and it's really close to the microphone and it sounds like it's in your ear and it's really crispy. I was like, "Evan! That is the coolest vocal sound, I love this sound, I want this sound." But we were recording at home and we started experimenting in our own DIY way to try to replicate a sound like that and it took so long and it was really hard and obviously we couldn't recreate that...but I wish!

I'm wondering now, how jazz has implemented itself in the way you make stuff, coming from jazz school?

I think that's definitely a huge part of my foundation, for sure. Mentally, I went through a period of time where studying jazz was really hard on me, mentally, like creating stuff, so I separated myself from the jazz process. But I learned how to sing and became a legitimate singer through singing jazz standards and learned so much about my voice through jazz. I was learning so many jazz standards and I'm sure that has an effect on my songs.

How do you know you're done with a song?

The EP was really hard because there were hundreds of mixes where I felt like we thought we were done. It's a lot easier to tell when a song is done when there's more people you're collaborating with. It's super subjective, you could never be done, really. I could easily still be working on the EP today. [laughs]

Especially because I kinda didn't want to show anyone. I showed a couple people early on when I was

working on it but, I felt like people just didn't understand it and it's like, "of course," because there's so much context in your head when you're working on a project. Like, if someone is not directly involved in a project, I feel like it's not helpful to show them. Maybe they can give some of their own subjective advice based on things they like outside of it, but I think it's important for someone to understand the context of a storyline of a project.

Evan was along for the whole ride of this project. It took a really long time and he would be like "Yes, this is done," but in my heart I'd be like, "No, its not."

You want to put your best foot forward and be proud of it.

Yeah, I think there's a balance. For so long, everyone was like "June, what are you doing? Aren't you making music?," and I was like "Ahh, I'm working so hard and no one can see what I'm doing." Then you get a lot of that outside pressure of like "C'mon, you gotta put stuff out!," and you see everyone putting stuff out. There's so much, so much art in the world and people want to see you do it, too.

I really had to push against it, but in the end, I learned so much about myself by taking my time and ignoring the pressure of thoughts of people going "What are you doing?" Even now, it's hard to not be influenced by outside people. It's a hard process, but a good learning experience for me. If something takes a long time, that's okay, and there is a balance. You can take a decade if you want to, but I mean... [laughs].

What does being a folk artist mean to you, as a Black musician?

A lot of the music I loved growing up was linked with white spaces and I think I've always been a little torn up about that. When i was younger I never had the chance to be in space with other Black creators and bond over folk music. I like a bunch of contrasting weird random things and over time I've learned to trust and believe in my own voice. It has definitely become my greatest purpose making music to add to the folk space as a black person and as a person who is nuanced, we're all so nuanced as black creators.

I feel like American folk has roots in Black music, especially Black culture, and it's interesting that it has been removed from the folk music narrative.

Yeah, for so long, I feel like I never really thought of my identity, I never really thought much about the history of the music and how it all really originated from black people. But, now, even just realizing when you go to folk concerts, there's not that many Black people there. I grew up in Florida which is a big context. I grew up in South Florida and I didn't really know that many Black people. There were a lot of other people from a lot of other places and alot of people from South America. I didn't feel completely different with my family not being from America.

I think a big part of my experience is that I never really had... You know when you're in high school, a big part of your musical experience is with your friend group? I never really had a large group. I had a couple of friends. I had one friend that we bonded over Nirvana. I found out about Simon and Garfunkel in 9th grade and loved it immediately. I didn't know anyone around me who liked that and I didn't really care and I would listen to it all the time.

When I make music, I think about connecting to a listener who is listening to music on their own, and I want to encourage the expand themselves musically. It is such a gift to be able to explore the history of the music you love and to think about how you can shape the future in a way that honors the innovators of the past. I want to inspire people, specifically Black people who are in spaces where they feel like outsiders, to listen to whatever they want and to encourage them to listen to a bunch of things.

I had so many contrasting things that I liked. It's a big part of who I am and why I am, the way I am. I want people to explore themselves on their own, especially being Black in America. You know, just go on your own and find the things that you like, contrary to what anyone tells you to like. I want more people that look like me to do that. That's what happened to me and now I'm exploring the things I can create and make. That's my biggest purpose with music and it's so inspiring to see other creators doing that, too.

June McDoom Recommends:

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston.

Unhalfbricking by Fairport Convention.

In The Dark by Sonya Spence.

Going to the NY Botanical garden in the Bronx year round.

Going through a collection of old vinyl sleeves, looking at the album art/formating and reading credits.

Name

June McDoom

Vocation

musician

Fact

Bella Newman

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