

# On being part of something bigger than yourself



Musician Lisa O'Neill discusses learning from everything you've done, valuing personal history, and the importance of observation.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2080 words.

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**You are often called one of Ireland's finest folk voices. What was the process or the path that led you to be a folk musician and a singer-songwriter?**

Everything that's happened, even all the mistakes in my life, has led me to this. My first instrument was the tin whistle, which I started playing at the age of seven. My parents knew then that I was naturally musical. I wasn't reading the music—I was soaking it up and playing it back. When I learned some guitar chords at the age of 13, that's when I started to sing. Immediately, I felt the guitar made sense without the voice. A couple of weeks later, I began to sing and write my own songs because I wanted to sing what I was thinking. That was a very young age. It took another at least 10 years for it to be something I thought I could give my energy entirely to... It took me a long time to believe in the ideas I was coming up with and that there would be anything worth anything to anybody other than me.

**You just mentioned that even the mistakes you made led you to where you are. What do you mean by that?**

We talk about getting enlightenment out of good experiences in our life, positive role models, and positive pointers in our life where something happened and sent us in this direction, but I also think that the not-so-pleasant and unsavory experiences on a human journey also decide the path. I equally have taken maybe a sense of wisdom out of a very difficult experience as I have out of a good experience, richer and deeper actually because we come out the other end. I'm talking about grief and difficult patches in life, and we survive them, we're strong. I've found that we can't decide our path. I think that everything that happens gets us there. Where I come from, we call something a happy accident on the road to discovery.

**You live in Ireland, a country heavily influenced by religion. Lately, there has been a lot of political activism there. What is it for you to be an artist, young and creative, in this environment?**

As a woman, I consider myself privileged in the sense that I'm not ruled by these unrealistic laws for women. For example, it is only recently that divorce and abortion have been acknowledged in this country. When you are ruled, there is no room for creativity or imagination.

I'm doing a little study at the moment on the Brehon Laws, which go back a long time before the British rule came into Ireland. Women had more rights back then, and it was fairer. There was more harmony. It's something that I think we are regaining rather than finding it for the first time when it comes to liberation. I think that there's so much wisdom in digging into the survival of the past. For thousands of years, people were communicating through poetry and songs. I think we've lost a lot in the modern world. In writing this new album, I feel quite green and young in my investigations and philosophical inquiries. I don't think I'll ever be a scholar

in that sense. They're all just questions and curiosities about how there has to be more than just our time here. Our ancestors were ancient. There's something to that wisdom, and I sense it. I'm concerned that we are living in a world where we are losing our intuition and relationship with the arts.

**Can you elaborate on what that intuition means for you?**

To listen on a level of emotion, to be listening to your environment, to your body, to others, how they're really feeling rather than what they're saying. Body language even. I'll give you a very practical, modern version of where I think we're losing our intuition. If I walk down the street in Dublin and there's somebody in front of me and they're on their phone, even if I can't see their phone, I know they're plugged out, because I can sense that their self-awareness of the people around them is not there, compared to the person who walks in front of me, not on their phone. They're looking up and they're looking around and they're listening, listening to everything. I'm still digging and trying to discover all of these things I feel so strongly about, but intuition and listening to ourselves are something I think we are losing.

**Your new album, *All of this is Chance*, is inspired by poetry and nature. Do you think that there is a difference between creativity that comes from being influenced by nature, versus creativity that arises from "the modern world"?**

I'm a songwriter but I'm inspired by many great writers and philosophers. There's a great philosopher, John Moriarty, who said that without the wildness around you, something terrible happens to the wildness inside of you. We're taking this wildness for granted. We wouldn't survive on this earth if it wasn't for the majesty of power of this earth, but yet our bees are in trouble and our rainforests are in trouble. The wildness around us is in trouble. I think the wildness inside of us that he is talking about is a very beautiful wildness, but it won't stay if we don't look after the wildness around us. I think that we are taking it for granted.

**What does that wilderness inside of us look like for you?**

I am sure you've experienced it yourself when you go to an art exhibition and you see a painting that you don't know why you're so affected by it, or you hear a piece of music and you don't know why you're so moved by it, because I think it's triggering the wildness inside of you. It's very hard to put into words the size of that. But when we sing and play music, it seems to give us a good idea of the shape of emotion outside that can't really be put into words. I think words are a little bit boring in comparison to how something actually really feels.

**I wonder if, in this wilderness that you describe, there is room for feelings like anxiety or self-doubt.**

But what are we anxious about? Everyone's having a different experience. Existentialism, as I read about it, is about our connection, our purpose, our meaning, what is the meaning of this, me being here, this life experience. It's a part of human intelligence. I mean, why does love hurt? And we can't answer that, because something that touches us so deeply that we want, which gives us our connectedness in this world and purpose, hurts. Why? Because we're afraid of losing it. Just like life or our fear of our mortality, it comes from the same place. We don't want to lose life. We love it, we want to hold it. But anxiety can take over that lovely space, that dance that we have with life. Instead, we're just holding tight and we're not actually dancing.

That wildness is almost suppressed and replaced with fear. I do think that the media and the narratives that we often get taught in school and in society really help that language along. They give us the language for that anxiety. Like if I can get really happy and lost in a wonderful movie or a piece of theater and maybe an hour before that, I always felt really anxious. I got away from my own thought process and lost, looking at something else. I think that's a nice savior. Music is a wonderful friend in that sense as well. It's not possible to play a piece of music and be anxious at the same time, because you are in the flow, you're gone somewhere else, and your mind is running after the idea rather than racing with the thing that's making you anxious. Anxiety is very repetitive. On a good day when I'm anxious, I just like to ring a little bell and say "No, stop." We have the power. We have a great imagination. I think that's a very beautiful way of looking at anxiety. What a wonderful imagination I have to think that. Why don't I think of something? Why don't I just change that? We have the power

to just flip that painting if it's dark and negative to positive. Sometimes you just have to walk outside and walk into nature and go back to yourself. I think we're very concerned about how we seem in the eyes of others. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok really don't help. We have no control over how people see us. It's time-wasting. It's important how we see ourselves. I think back to the wilderness, we all have a beaten heart and a river of blood running through our veins. We all have amazing potential, but we're wrapped up in how people see us, and that's a mistake.

**The poem, the Great Hunger by Patrick Kavanaugh has a significant influence on your new album. How did you find this poem, and why did it create such a huge impact on your work and creative process?**

Well, I'd heard about the poem and Kavanaugh because he grew up in a county very close to me. Our national theater invited me during the lockdown to write a song in response to the poem, which I did. I felt like there is so much depth to his poem and what he was trying to say. When Patrick Kavanaugh wrote this poem, he was talking about a hunger for the freedom of the mind. My album is very much about freedom. How much freedom do we really have? Do we have freedom of thought?

I think he felt that the imagination was oppressed. Our imagination it's still in us, and it comes out through music, songs, and poetry and said of frustrations. We know we were robbed of aspects of ourselves, of our true selves. That's quite a dark way of putting it, but that's colonization across the globe. That's the depths of the effect of it. We're traumatized. We're not doing too bad today. But if Irish people seem strange or drunk or wild, there's quite a narrative as to why, and there's a lot of history.

**What was some advice or words of wisdom that help you when you were doubting yourself or when you were creatively stuck?**

It's good to look at how far you've come when you're doubting yourself. Even in the simplest of senses that when you're born, you really do need your parents or guardians. You might find some adults feeling a bit like life, "Why am I here?" But you're here, and you can stand up now on your two legs and walk around and make choices. Also, your sense of self is very important. Your core, your center. When I'm feeling a little bit misplaced or at odds with the world..If I feel lost, I feel strong when I remember that I am part of a chain of a line of ancestors who've survived, and I feel like all the weight is not on me, I'm just part of the journey. I take great strength out of that, that I am older than I am than my years, that we're part of a journey. I'm part of the journey of my great-grandparents I never met, and further than that. That makes me feel really strong.

**Lisa O'Neill Recommends:**

Patrick Kavanaugh is definitely worth reading.

**Edgar Allan Poe:** I found out this week that his grandparents were from a small town quite close to mine. That's very mystical to me.

I'm extremely inspired by **my nieces** and their imagination and the way they see the world.

Animal behaviors, mountains, and rivers

If you notice something, then **it's important to be observant**. In any form of art or creativity, I think if you're not observing your surroundings in your environment and how the world and society are affecting those around you, then what will your work be worth to anyone? So, it is part of our role to observe and to, I suppose, use our platform as a voice for others.

Name

Lisa O'Neill

Vocation

singer, songwriter, musician

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