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March 24, 2023 -

As told to Meredith Graves, 2833 words.

Tags: Music, Magic, Process, Focus, Inspiration.

On embracing the magic inside you

Musician Mad Gallica discusses how she drew inspiration from a lengthy illness, the power of community, and not losing your creative spirit as you grow up.

You're a member of a very small, but very interesting club—people who have had transformative artistic experiences that happened as a result of a severe illness. What can you tell me about your first trip to the in between?

I feel like I was going there, honestly, when I was a kid. Even before I got sick, I would go out into the woods—and scare my parents to death, because I would just wander off on my own and disappear when they weren't looking—and I would talk to the trees. I remember hearing this inner voice inside. It was this meditative, trance-like state I would get in. And I lost that part of myself growing up. You just begin to not believe in it, because we're told by society or in one way or another, *that's just not real. That just isn't true. Brains aren't capable of that.*

And so when I became sick in my late teens and had just gotten into college, I started to slip into that in-between state, because I was having to lie still for the first time in years in bed, just really, really ill. I felt like I was spinning—almost like a dizziness, and then everything would become clear and I realized that I wasn't in my body anymore. I was *somewhere else*. And then that somewhere-else started to become clearer and clearer to me the more I started to tap into it.

And in this space is where the secondary characteristic of Mad Gallica came to be, correct?

Yes, exactly. This is where I began to hear music, and I really felt like I was going mad. I realized I had had this inside of me all along, since I was a kid. And I feel like we all do, but we push it down and we're not allowed to embrace it. I mean, still to this day I shut it down a little bit. I'll say, "Oh, it was a fever dream. I was sick. It was creativity." And I'll still say that, because it kind of was in a way, but that doesn't exclude the magic in it, and the magic that I feel we all have inside of us.

Would you say that Mad Gallica is an alter ego? Is it a separate persona completely? Is it a part of yourself? Is it outside yourself?

I think Mad Gallica, the name, in essence, describes who I am at the core of my being. Not just Dylan, this human role that I'm playing on Earth. It is the essence, it's the seed inside of me, inside of my soul, my very being that always was and always will be. I think that's how I would explain who Mad Gallica is.

So really, Dylan is the alter ego.

Exactly. And I feel like that can be said for anyone. Who are you? That's what I want to do with my music, is inspire people to go into the vortex and go to the beyond within, and explore who they are outside of themselves.

I find it really interesting that you mentioned going out into the woods when you were a kid and how your youth factored into where you're at today. I've also read that your childhood was spent in part touring with your family, playing Appalachian music. I mean, if this is traditional Appalachian music that we're talking about, that's typically a very folkloric and rooted culture with a lot of tradition, yeah?

Yes. Yes, it is. It's really cool because all of the songs have so many different versions and they're passed down from generation to generation. And so, one song will have two different pronunciations of the name. For instance, the murder ballad "Tom Dula." Some people say it's "Tom Dooley." There's certain verses that some people created and some that are omitted. It's like the telephone game over a generation's generation. So it's really cool whenever you sit down with a group of musicians who play all

of that, which version you're going to hear, which version you're going to do, and sometimes it's all new. You've never heard this version. That's always a part of who I am as an artist too, and my roots and just being able to play music with my family is such a gift from an early age.

Where do you see there being bridges between the more traditional folk music of your early years as a performer versus the more futuristic music that you're making now?

I write many different styles of music, and people are going to hear that all come out in another album I've written - and I've written many different albums. I'm just ready to get them all out. But as far as *Enter the Vortex* that I'm currently working on, I think music is all storytelling. And Appalachian music, it is storytelling in its essence. I've always drawn inspiration from that. And I think it's really important to have live instruments for a project. I want to bring the rawness that I felt sitting around the campfire, people bringing out their fiddles and their guitars. You can hear all the imperfections of the strings and the scraping of the bow and the click of the fingernails against the guitar. That in its essence is inspiring me to really take this project to the next level and have the live instrumentalists, and have that storytelling element that is a part of my roots and my musical heritage.

You mentioned having lots of different albums in the can, and stuff that you're ready to work on or release. You have such a prolific skillset, such a diverse background, in terms of your musicianship—a vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, producer, a costume developer and designer. And of course, per your own bio, a work for hire musician doing keys and backup vocals for one of the biggest bands in rock. Can you tell us a bit about life as a touring musician, especially right now when the landscape is so far out for touring musicians?

It's definitely something that I think everyone who's touring right now has experienced over the past few years. It is a very different landscape than it was in 2018, for instance, with COVID and everything. But I was really excited because touring last year, it started out where there's so many unknowns. And as the year went on, and more and more people started to become comfortable with coming out to the shows, it was an emergence of joy for people who had been shut away for so long during the pandemic. It was more beautiful than I've ever experienced, the joy on people's faces, how powerful music is, and how healing it is. And every time I got on stage it would be a celebration, which, I don't think I'd had that level of gratitude before for what the experience of performing live music is like and what it feels like. It's always been exciting, but there's just this new level of joy coming out after the pandemic.

And you've had a lot of touring experiences and a lot of live music experiences over the years. I know in the past you've worked with some all-time greats, like Metallica and System of A Down. How have those experiences helped shape who you are today as a musician, but also just as a person in the world? I have to imagine it's a pretty impactful experience to be on the same stage as Serj.

It is. I just keep having all these pinch-me moments, and I couldn't be more grateful to have those experiences. I've talked about this before, but I struggle with a lifetime of chronic doubt in myself. And when you have moments like that, when you walk off of a stage and realize where you are, who you're with and what you're doing, it's profound. It's just profound. And I don't want to ever get used to that, even though I... I don't want to ever get used to that. I don't want to ever take that for granted. It just shows me every time, this is what I'm here to do, and I can't imagine any other life. It's just amazing.

What is it about this new project of yours, *Enter the Vortex*, that you thought made it a good candidate for public funding on Kickstarter? What is it about this project that made you want to take the leap and do it publicly?

When I do something, I like to do it all the way. I don't like to half-ass anything. I don't want to waste anyone's time. I just want to do it exactly how I hear in my head. And this project is massive - not just hiring an orchestra, but the story, the imagery, the costumes, the characters, the live show experience, the animated film that I want to have that I see along with this music. I just felt like, *there's no way I can do this. There's just absolutely no way. Why even try?* And so I just kept shoving that music down, but it stayed with me. That idea did not give up on me, even though I gave up on it.

During the pandemic we were all experiencing that the world was ill, it was going through this really sad illness, and we had to go back to being quiet again, we had to go within ourselves. And I started to go back into myself, and the music was still there, and I started hearing it again, and it started driving me crazy. I would be hearing it on repeat in my head all the time. I would go to bed, I'd wake up at three in the morning, it would be there playing. My mind was just starting to work on it again 24/7. And also during the pandemic, I left a very toxic relationship and I was writing a lot of music about that too. That's a whole other album. I have all of this music that I was sitting on and I was like, "Okay, I have to go. Which one do I do?"

I toured with one of my dearest friends, Hayden Scott, who is just an incredible person and drummer and orchestrator and all the things. I pitched him a ton of music. I mean, I probably overwhelm him with dozens and dozens of songs. But I didn't send him *Enter the Vortex* because I was like, "I'm crazy. I am absolutely out of my mind to think that this can actually happen." And it's weird music. It's non-formulaic. It's all over the place. It's just nothing that I've heard on the radio or top 40. And it doesn't need to be there. It doesn't need to be there to be successful. But I'd been turned down by so many producers or just they tried to turn me into things or they would say, "Dumb your music down. You dumb it down."

So in my mind I'm thinking, "Well, this is just never going anywhere." But I played it for one of my best

friends who I admire greatly, and she said, "You have to send this to him. This is something I've never heard before. I've never heard music like this. You need to give this a chance. You need to give yourself a chance."

And so I played it for him. I talked with him a little bit later, and that's the project that he wanted to do out of all the music I'd sent. And I was shocked. I was shocked because I just didn't believe that this could be possible. How am I going to get money for this? It's a huge idea. That's when I started researching Kickstarter. It's showing me just in the first day that, "Wow, this project maybe does have an audience. Maybe there really are people that this project can reach." And it's been building on itself since then. And every day I see people donate or comment on the little sound bites I send out. I get more affirmation that I did the right thing. And it's more and more exciting to me every day that we're doing this.

I mean, I don't think it's going to be a shocker to anyone who ends up reading this that in addition to being the person doing the interview, I'm also the head of music at Kickstarter. And so from that perspective, you are in a lot of ways my Platonic ideal of a creator who would come to this site. It's not just for bands who don't have enough music to get a record deal yet, who need to get the money to make a first record. It's for incredibly skilled musicians such as yourself who need to get the resources together to further their artistic ambitions in ways that a traditional label wouldn't necessarily even support.

Oh my gosh, it's so true. The thing I love about it is that I don't think I could give it to a label, and they would really understand it. It's a great idea, but it's a lot of money to risk on something like this. I couldn't guarantee that I could have the creative freedom that I need to get this music out in the way that Hayden and I envision it.

And I know I've said this before on my website, I really feel like I'm working for the backers. They are my label. They are my team. Halfway through my Kickstarter, I had a Kickstarter backer's appreciation Zoom party because I wanted to see the people who were backing my project. I wanted to talk with them. I wanted to hear, "Where would you like to see this project go from here? Because now we can look at stretch goals. Now that we've reached our goal, what else do you want to create?" It was such a beautiful thing to, first of all, say thank you to everyone face to face as far as Zoom allows, but also to hear, "Okay, what does my team think about this? Where would you like to see this go?" Because that's who I'm working for. And it was, it's a beautiful thing to be able to connect with them in that way.

Another thing that Kickstarter's really helped with is, I'm promoting this project now before it's even out. It's getting incredible momentum. We're going to release it months from now, but it already has people talking about it and creating cool fan art about it and talking about the costumes and who their favorite is. And they haven't even heard the all of the music yet. It blows me away.

Then there's people who are offering their skills. "Hey, do you want any designs? Let me do this for you. I'm a costume designer. Can I help you? I make cool key chains. Can I help you with your rewards?" It is unreal. I really feel like it is a community. It really is a community platform. It's so much more than the money that's going to get the product out there and made. Now I have a community of believers in this project that have my back in this. And I'm so grateful for all of them.

Do you think of yourself in this way as a world-builder? Is that a word that you relate to your particular creative act?

Yes. And I actually mentioned that on my Kickstarter, that we're not just creating music. We are world building together. Because music is not just an auditory experience; it's mental, it's visual, it's visceral. It is all encompassing. And the world that I'm building with Enter the Vortex is the world that I entered when I was in my sickness, my illness, where my creativity lives. And so in essence, yes. It's a community theater. You're going to a show on Broadway that's telling a story that really reaches out to the audience. And they can go into the vortex themselves and they can discover who they are inside of it and what their alter ego is. Or as you brilliantly put it, maybe they are the alter ego to their soul or their being and their energy. And so Kickstarter really helps with world building. We are building this world together and I'm really excited to see where it goes.

Mad Gallica Recommends:

Five compositions that inspired me to become a composer (in no particular order):

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"The Kiss" — Last of the Mohicans (Trevor Jones & Randy Edelman)

.....
"The Rite of Spring" — Igor Stravinsky

.....
"Claire de Lune" — Claude Debussy

.....
"Overture" — Jesus Christ Superstar (Andrew Lloyd Webber)

.....
"G Minor Prelude, Op. 23, No. 5" — Sergei Rachmaninoff

Name

Mad Gallica

Vocation

musician

Fact

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