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As told to Greta Rainbow, 2398 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Collaboration, Focus, Inspiration, Mental health.

On cultivating a holistic approach

Musician Maria BC discusses being brave, solitude as part of your process, and reanimating what's inside of you.

How did it happen that you recorded your new album in someone else's house?

I spent about two weeks in my friend's family home in the Berkeley Hills. Her mom was away on sabbatical, so their house was empty for a while and I offered to do chores in exchange for being able to stay there and record. They were like, "No, just have fun." It was a really, really lucky thing. It had a view of the Golden Gate Bridge—it was like a residency; it was luxurious. It's this gorgeous place with a very old Steinway piano that still had the note names taped with masking tape on the keys, left over from when [my friend] Erin was a little kid and learning to play. It was very romantic and sweet. The hammers were super squeaky and noisy and there was dust on the keys. I love human sounds and recordings, and I felt an immediate sentimental attachment to the piano. It felt like history was coming out of it.

I tracked half of the record there. The rest was recorded in a variety of places: some of it in the apartment I was living in at the time and some of it was at my dad's church in Ohio. He's an organist at an Episcopal church so I did recordings in the sanctuary and in the basement there. And then a little at my dad's house, and in another person's apartment.

Can you feel the difference between songs and sounds that were recorded in different places?

Especially with home recording, the sound of a room or the sound of a space is impossible to ignore. It affects the quality of the recording so profoundly. More generally, my writing process was affected by my moving to the West Coast. I live in Oakland now. I found myself drawn more to sunnier sounds. More of the natural world was coming into my lyrics. I don't think that you can ever divorce music from its context. I try to let that in rather than resist it.

How do you balance being drawn to nature while living in an urban space?

I don't know if that's something I necessarily struggle with in terms of songwriting, but it's recently become an issue with my approach to recording. I have a holistic approach to music making. It's hard for me to see the compositional process and the recording process and the arrangement process as being completely different things. But I moved into an apartment where I get a lot of street noise and I hear everything my neighbors are doing. It's impossible to record here, so I'm kind of at odds with my urban environment in that sense. But then the urban environment is an advantage in the sense that I am surrounded by other amazing artists. I feel confident that by being in community with them, and them being people who are also facing the same kinds of frustrations and struggles, together we can find ways of making our work work.

What is your relationship to collaboration?

Most of my process is pretty isolated and alone. I love my solitude. I think it's the most fruitful part of the process. I have often collaborated with people in a way where I'm singing over their work or adding decoration to their work, and I have not yet been able to figure out how to slowly make a song with someone else where we're each adding our own parts to it that contribute to a structure in a collaborative way. When I'm composing a song, while I am not necessarily hearing the complete thing in my head, I have a sense of the whole in an abstract way. It's hard for me to let other people into that process without feeling like I'm relinquishing the whole thing.

But all of that said, *Spike Field* felt more collaborative than anything else I've done. I had my friends Gabe and Izzy on one track. My friend MIZU plays cello on the song "Tied." The biggest thing was I had someone else mix the album. My ego resisted it for a bit. But I knew in my heart of hearts that the music will benefit so much from another pair of ears, and from someone who's actually equipped to mix music. I'm not. I don't have a desk. I don't have monitors. So I brought in this person Ruairi, who makes music as ODAE. It ended up being the most beautiful process ever. I felt very vulnerable, because so much of the mixing process is very creative and someone else was brought into that emotional space. It felt like a psychological and artful thing that we were doing together, not a technical battle. Making things gel after they've been recorded, facilitating this delivery of sound from the material to the listener, is a really precious thing. Some people will tell you it's not a dark art, but I really do think that it is.

What would the ideal "holistic approach" look like?

I'm always kind of figuring that out. I have produced my own work out of necessity. This idea of "There's no one else who's going to do it, so I'm going to do it. I have a microphone and I have a broken preamp and I want to make something, so I'm going to." I've grown to love the process and I've picked up some skills along the way, but I wouldn't consider myself a skillful producer. To be honest, if people hear my music—especially my previous music—and it resonates with them, it's probably the songwriting more than the quality of the recorded package. I was really excited about the potential of sounds that sound bad. With time, I've become a little less interested in that, and more interested in things that feel fleshed out and listenable in different environments.

A holistic approach is not going to be the same thing from record to record. A lot depends on the resources available to me. Who is down to be helping me out at the moment? Who is giving me advice that I'm excited about? Who is playing sounds for me that I'm excited about? All of that is going to affect what makes the work feel complete.

How did changing record labels affect your creative process?

Signing to Sacred Bones was a dream come true. I've been a fan of their records since I was in high school. It felt very genre-affirming. If someone examines you cursorily and you read as "a woman with a guitar," you get lumped in with a certain kind of music that I didn't feel like I was totally in good company with. It felt affirming to have a brand on my music indicating that it should be heard with a certain kind of ear.

Father/Daughter was also incredible to work with, but they were pretty clear that it was a one-album deal and that they're there for artists in a present moment. I was lucky to have another label that was interested in working with me after the fact.

Sacred Bones has such a consistent brand with regard to visual aesthetics. How do visuals factor into your practice?

I actually really like when labels brand their work. At least for Sacred Bones, it indicates a real investment in the artist rather than an attempt to commercialize.

I don't think I have the best organic visual imagination. But we live in an extremely visual culture, and I know, for my part, it is really difficult to hear a record and not feel like your interpretation of it is affected by what the record cover looks like. Even the colors of it bleed into the music. When you're listening to music digitally, it's not like the days of CDs or vinyl. Every time you go to look at what you're listening to, the art is there on the screen. There's the moving Spotify canvases, the way people hear about your album is from Instagram. It's all so visual and you have to be very careful in how you curate that. Because I had this new budget, I could license an artist for the cover. When Linnea Nugent took the photo that you see, which I was just so enamored with—and I've been enamored with her work for many years—that felt right.

I think that people often hear ambient music and the overwhelming feeling is that it's beautiful, or pretty, or precious. Is beauty what you're striving for?

If my work is trying to do anything, it's trying to reanimate the thing inside myself and others that attaches them to life or that makes them want to be alive, rather than passively be alive or not want to be alive. I don't think that the thing that does that is always necessarily beautiful.

That's a hard question to answer about your art. What is your relationship to the press and doing interviews like this?

Exposing yourself to unseen judgment is always very scary. I have an intense anxiety about public humiliation and I often find myself saying—especially after shows, because I have pretty bad stage fright—doing this kind of work would be so much easier if I had a public humiliation fetish, which I unfortunately do not. I get really stressed about what I'm going to read about my own work. I have never worked so hard on anything in my life as *Spike Field*. I do not think that I could have met the deadline and made anything better. And I'm just letting it go. Here is this thing I have been so looking forward to sharing with people for so long, and suddenly it's not mine anymore. I can't even listen to it now, even though I am so overjoyed with how people have responded to it. Some weird change happened. Another artist described releasing music like dropping a treasure chest into the ocean. Like, yeah, it belongs to the ocean now and not me.

And it could be discovered many years later, like forgotten treasure.

You don't know in the long run how people's opinions about a thing that you made will change.

How do you deal with your stage fright?

I am always itching for an excuse to talk about this, because I think it gives insight into why I play live the way that I do. I've done 90% of my performances sitting down in a chair. I don't think people love that. I've gotten negative feedback. And I don't love doing it. But I have a hand tremor, and when I'm nervous, the hand tremor gets so bad that I can't play. Sitting down helps with circulation and calms me down; it just makes it more likely that I'm not going to choke. Over time, I've been able to feel more emboldened to stand while I'm playing, and ideally I'll do that for every show. But if I haven't played a show for a while, I'm probably going to do it sitting down again. That's just the way that it's going to be until I conquer that stage fright.

My friend Ana, who makes music as Mind Mirage, was telling me about a show where she felt like she had completely failed because the audience was talking the whole time. They weren't paying attention and weren't giving anything back. She described her body as a mixing board, and when the electricity in the room is off, her throat channel closes off and there's not going to be any sound that comes out of it. I feel like that's such an apt metaphor. When the electricity of the space is fucked up, my hands are not going to work. If I want to do this and not be constantly humiliating myself in extreme ways, I have to minimize risk as much as possible.

I hope that your audiences are kind.

I'm very grateful for people who understand my choice to sit down is also an attempt to break down the hierarchy of the artist on stage, standing up, towering over people in the pit. My sitting down is an invitation for other people to sit down. But you also have to honor the history of live music. Kim Gordon said somewhere that what people are paying for when they go to see live music is people being brave. It's not seeing someone who is technically skilled but someone who can be confident in the face of many forces conspiring against them. As I continue to explore performing live, which is still so new to me, I hope that that's the direction I feel emboldened to go in.

I can't forget to ask you: how did you come up with the song title "Haruspex," which the dictionary tells me is Latin for "one who looks at guts"?

A lot of my lyrics are drawn from poetry, which is the thing I really enjoy. "Haruspex" is from this book called Fludde by Peter Mishler that I had been reading while I was writing the record. I generally have a troubled relationship to language, and I find myself grasping at straws trying to look for words. When I find a word that's new to me that I really enjoy, I write it down and memorize it and internalize it, as a way of trying to regain control. I like "haruspex" so much. I immediately felt like it was holding, in this evocative way, a lot of anxiety that I have about feeling like I'm constantly at war with my body in a world where we all have to work and we all have to be worried about productivity all the time. It forces us to view our own bodies as objects. And here is this word that is about an ancient idea of reading the future through physical, corporeal materials like the entrails of animals. It just felt rife for music.

Maria BC Recommends:

pluots. and? figs (that's one)

peeling off your friend's sunburnt skin (with consent)

the warped aspect ratio of cloudy skies in june

bringing your jacket in case it gets cold


total darkness

Name
Maria BC

Vocation
musician

Fact

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