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On hard work, staying healthy, and creating in multiple mediums

Musician and visual artist Marissa Nadler discusses what it means to defy genre, the benefits of pursuing a variety of different art forms, taking care of yourself, and learning to do things for yourself.

You recently collaborated with Steve Brodsky from Cave In and Mutoid Man on the Droneflower album. In the past, you also worked with the former black metal musician Xasthur. What do you see as the benefits of working with musicians who come from very different musical worlds?

It's the fun of trying new things, but I also just don't really identify as a genre-specific musician. And I feel like I'm just getting started, even though it seems strange for me with this many records [out], but I do believe in people's music creatively morphing and transforming over the years. I think some of these collaborations are helping me find out which new paths and directions I want to go in with my own solo work.

Simon Raymonde, who runs my other label, Bella Union, was in the Cocteau Twins. I did a few songs with him for his last record, his solo project. It's called Lost Horizons, and he sent me a song to work on. These things are all fun to do, [and] it's a different type of writing than writing from scratch.

Normally, when I write with a guitar, I'll sit down and everything happens at once. I'll hear a guitar melody, and with this other type of writing it frees me up to explore my voice more, or my melody writing more, without having... it's almost like taking black-and-white photos versus color photos.

I like that comparison.

I like black-and-white because it separates composition, or makes composition the focal point and contrast really evident, so you can see things more clearly. When I already have the structure of the song, I can see clearly what it needs. It's a totally different approach. And I'm trying to get better at recording myself—it's a pretty deep interest of mine. So these projects enable me to improve my skills at the same time. It's like killing a few birds with one stone.

Would you like to be self-sufficient in that regard?

I already pretty much am. I just could use some work in learning more about levels, and auxiliary sends or whatever. But I'm kind of like an intermediate Logic user, at this point, and that's what I've been recording on. When I first started, my recording sound was really terrible. I went from cassette tapes at first in the '90s to mini-discs, but I think the technology has many gifts for musicians these days. It's really easy to get good recordings at home and so I feel like it's the perfect time to empower myself to learn how to completely get the sounds I want without relying on others. The problem with producers is that their tastes always become involved. You're always dealing with what they think you should become. And so that may be why I haven't really done any records where I completely produced them myself. I think that might be next.

Has that been an ongoing battle for you—fighting to keep your identity against other people's ideas or expectations?

In retrospect, with this many albums, I wish that I could maybe have stuck to my guns more—and moving forward that's exactly what I intend to do. I think it's easy for a delicate, soft-spoken type...it can be hard for people like me to assert themselves in male-dominated studios. But luckily things have changed, and I've had some great experiences with producers, like Randall Dunn.

We also interviewed Randall for this site.

He's a great guy. I have to say he's one of my favorite people to work with because our aesthetics really line up. When he wrote me years ago that he wanted to work with me, I was working as a school teacher, kind of taking a break [from music]. I was teaching fine art at a special needs high school in Braintree, Massachusetts, and was kind of not sure what to do. Then I decided I missed music and he reached out at the same time. He was great because he's kind of into the same stuff as me, but in many ways it's also different stuff. We have enough overlap that I feel like he wasn't stylistically bullying, but great to work with, just because he did have a different approach, or a transformative approach to the music.

So I anticipate working with him again at some point. I want to make a zillion different records and I think it's interesting with music writers, because there's a desire to want to use a few genre tags to make it easily digestible, but I'm kind of like, I want to make a grungy rock record and then a country record. I wonder if that's okay. I think it is okay, though, to keep changing. David Bowie did that, right?

Absolutely. And I love that you mentioned your teaching job because one of the ideas behind this site is for it to be a resource for artists—not only with creativity, but also for surviving as an artist. Do you still teach, or have some other job that you do when you're not on the road?

Currently I'm not teaching. My second gig has kind of morphed over the years. In the beginning I went to RISD, and then I got a master's degree, also at RISD, for art education. At the same time I recorded my first proper record—*Ballads of Living and Dying*, it was a pretty gothy record—which was released in 2004. So I got a job teaching in Harlem right after college, and I've kind of been teaching on and off forever. But then it became more part-time, and now my second gig is trying to have a painting career, which is exciting.

Like fine art painting?

Yeah. At first, I was an illustration major, but I really was more of a painter than anything else. I took a long time off from painting after art school, which is a common story. I think people get burnt out, or unsure of what to do after seeing so many possibilities. And the music kind of took me away. I put that first record out while I was teaching in Harlem, and I got an invitation to tour that record in 2005. It was the end of the school year so I decided to do it, and that just took over my life. I just kind of got stuck in this vortex of the many, many records that I've made. But then I basically had one student who I was teaching. It was a 90-year-old woman, private lessons, which I found easier to handle with my touring schedule, and she said she felt like I had transformed the way that she saw the world. I thought that was the nicest thing that anybody ever said to me.

Wow, what a huge compliment.

Yeah, it was intense for somebody that old who had seen so much to have been touched. I had a few other instances, like this kid at the therapeutic high school [who] had gotten kicked out for... well, I actually shouldn't reveal why. But I had a special connection with a bunch of teenage kids, and one of them in particular was a really talented visual artist. I got him into MassArt, and now he's in China doing a painting residency. So I had this whole secret life: I was Miss Nadler, the art teacher at this high school.

I loved teaching, but it's so hard in America. I really empathize with the plight of how hard it is to be a full-time artist, which I've essentially been. Every gig has been secondary to my music, and then I started painting again two years ago. I also launched this fine art shop on my website and was totally shocked that people bought every painting. So now I'm like, "Maybe I should actually try to get into a gallery." A lot of people think you have to pick one medium. I don't agree with that.

In a lot of ways, you're living the dream. Sure, you're not surviving solely off your music, but the way you're supplementing it is also through making art. How many people can say that?

It's tough. When you tell people you're a musician or an artist, it's like, "Yeah, but what do you *really* do?" And I feel like as an art teacher, I have a special connection to this idea. I heard it when I went to public school in Massachusetts, too. I was always a very artistic kid, and always had to deal with the comments from the kids that were just repeating what their parents said, which was, "You can't be an artist. You're never going to make any money." Which makes me sad because some of the best jobs in the world involve having to go to art school to do them, like being an architect or an engineer, an industrial designer, a graphic designer, a web designer. You know, there's a zillion things. It's more than just drawing and painting. So it is frustrating. I hope the public perception changes over time in our country.

The last time we spoke, you made an offhand comment that led me to believe that you've typically operated outside of a specific music "scene" or community. Do you prefer working in isolation?

I don't think there really was a scene for me. I didn't want to be coffee-house folksy. I didn't really want to be in a band. I was very gothy from an early age, you know? My first record is especially mystical, so I guess there wasn't a niche for me—and if there was, I was too shy to find it. When I did find some of the indie-rock world, it felt like I was back in high school or something.

So it isn't necessarily by choice that I haven't found a scene, or maybe it's just that I'm a loner. Being an artist or writer requires a lot of alone time, great focus and determination, hard work, and I find socializing is sometimes a distraction. I know that sounds crazy, but I keep a small world. I mean, I know you have to live to make art, so there's a delicate balance. I didn't find Boston very... it's been hard for me, but I think it has more to do with my personality type than the city. I'm borderline agoraphobic, I think. I'm joking, but I'm kind of an indoor kid.

You're very prolific. What do you attribute that to?

I guess I'm a little bit of a... not a workaholic, but making art makes me happy and I love making records. But it's also what I put my focus on, so I didn't really spend a lot of time bumming around, I guess. It's not that many records to me. I could do more, but at the same time, I really put a separation between the early years and my second act. And the dividing line kind of falls on the *July* album. *July, Strangers, For My Crimes, Droneflower*—I feel this second act is stronger than the first, musically and writing-wise. And it's exciting because I think there's this real misconception with songwriters that your first record's your best, or the second one, or something. I fully intend to keep getting better.

Maybe it's the art teacher background or my work ethic, which is kind of intense, and probably why I get along with Steve Brodsky so well—because he's also psycho. I know I'm really non-linear; I'm sorry. But that's another thing: I have an ADD-ish personality and I'm really up and down emotionally, so I kind of ride the creative wave. I use the art as a coping mechanism and as an outlet. Maybe that's why I have so many records. Music is my best friend.

How do you avoid burnout when you're working constantly like that?

I switch mediums. For instance, after I make a record sometimes I'll go straight to visual art. I got really into stop-motion animation for a while, and I did a video for "All the Colors of the Dark," which I think is the best video I've made. I guess I still have that joy of discovering new things. I got into whittling wood; I wanted to make guitars. Another thing is, I don't want to make any more records like *For My Crimes* or *July*, I've decided—at least for a while. I feel like that's the end of this trilogy and I'm not exactly sure what's next for my solo music yet. Which is kind of a fun place to be, but I feel like I've done those records. I just can't decide, exactly. I'm kind of feeling this ambient work. I'd love to make soundtracks.

You said collaborations often give you a fresh perspective on your own work. Do you have a similar feeling when you switch between mediums? Does painting give you a new outlook when you return to music?

Yeah, it does. And honestly the longer I'm away, the better. I know some people say there's no such thing as a muse, or "Don't rely on the muse." I guess the muse for me is just real life—and fantasy life. But it takes a while sometimes, when you really squeeze that for all it's worth, for it to return. I obviously have a pretty intense work ethic, so if anybody were to ask me what's the secret to writing a good song, I would say it's hard work. I just think the idea of talent or giftedness, maybe that's again the art teacher in me that says there's always an element of natural ability, but working at something is great. I know it's a contradiction. Sometimes if I haven't written a song in three months and I pick up the guitar, it'll be the best song I've written to that day—just because I kind of store up all that creative energy and it's almost like a bank.

You've been having some trouble with your hands from playing so much guitar. How are you coping with that?

I want to learn how to play piano. That's my next goal, because I think it puts your hands in a more natural position. I'm not abandoning the guitar or anything—I'm just excited to try some new things, and it's a good time to do it. But I don't think the problems I'm having are just from playing so much guitar. It was the six years of art school and, before that, an obsessive childhood. I was a weird kid. We didn't have internet. Most of my memories involve copying master paintings in my basement, listening to cassette tapes. So I think my hands are just aging at a faster pace because I overused them. I had some arthritis and stuff at too young of an age.

It's important for artists to take care of their bodies, too, and that's something that people don't talk about a lot, especially in the songwriter world. You hear these romantic tales of self-destruction, these heroic, sad downfalls, but it's like, what happens to the people who actually want to keep going? I want to be alive to make more art, so yoga and stuff like that have been helpful to calm my brain.

Do you have a specific routine?

I brought a yoga mat on tour. On this last tour I didn't have to because I was carrying so much stuff everyday that I came back really buff. When I'm home I go to the gym with another artist. She's a jeweler, and I think imposing some kind of structure, even for a self-employed artist with a lonely life, is a great tool to not go crazy, because you get perspective on other people's lives—not just your own imagination.

What about writer's block? Is that a common occurrence for you, and if so, how do you deal with it?

I had really bad writer's block when I wrote *Strangers*. I didn't really write about the stuff that I wanted to write about because I hadn't admitted it to myself. And I think sometimes writer's block is about stuff like that. You're not being honest with yourself. I finally broke through it, but I did so by writing an incredibly apocalyptic record that was very symbolic. I told Randall I wrote a record about the end of the world, and he said, "I don't think this record is about the end of the world. I think this record is about the end of your world." And I was just like, "Fuck you." But at the same time he was really right. It definitely was an anxiety record.

What's the piece of advice that you wish someone had given you when you were starting out?

Trust your gut. As a female musician who came out before this age of massive female empowerment, I always had a male manager or a male producer, so I was running this extremely delicate, very feminine music by a

lot of dudes whose tastes didn't necessarily line up with my own. And I was giving their opinions weight over my own. Maybe it's because I didn't have a classical music background and therefore didn't think my ideas were valid. I should have gone to a girls rock camp or something. I think it's great that those things exist now, because I was shy. I did stick to my guns regardless, but I do remember it being at times very hard for me.

So now if I were to give advice to someone starting out, I'd say don't be afraid to record yourself. Don't be afraid to learn the tools so that you don't have to rely on other people. Because I had labels say to me, "You need at least three songs with drums on them," and all sorts of major-label shit from supposedly indie labels. People should really just create what they want, because there's a market. You can put it right out to the world.

You mentioned the era of female empowerment we're in now, with the Me Too movement and the like. As a female musician, have your experiences improved since this has been happening or is it still business as usual?

It depends on what country you're in. On this recent tour, there were a few shows where I didn't have a sound engineer with me, and was stuck trying to prove myself—it can be demeaning at times. A lot of women have a lot of horror stories. It's still an uphill battle. But I think things are definitely changing for the better. It's exciting. I don't want to say it's just men against women. Because maybe sound guys are just condescending pricks no matter what.

Five bits of advice from Marissa Nadler

It is possible to have a career as an artist. Don't listen to anyone that tells you otherwise. When I was younger, when my focus was more on fine art, I had to fight the misconception that a career in the arts wasn't a "real job." I have fought this societal belief, subtly and not too subtly, for years since.

As an art teacher, when I worked at a therapeutic high school, I had a very special connection with a student who was told the same thing. It was an uphill battle even to convince the other teachers that this student's art was just as important as him learning math. Despite his struggles, he's now a graduate of art school, and exhibiting his work all over the world. He seems happy, too. I'm not sure where art became so undervalued in our society, but we literally wouldn't have buildings to live in and cars to drive if it weren't for the designers and the visionaries who stuck to their guns.

It takes a lot of self belief to get through the grind. If you're lucky to have a mentor, listen to them and let them guide you. Yes, you likely will be poorer than most of your friends for the majority of your adult life. However, if material possessions aren't your guiding force, then you should be all right.

Do it for the right reasons. A career in music can be brutal. You must trust yourself more than anyone, and this goes especially for the young women out there. I have met my fair share of vampires. I have cycled through many record labels, I experienced many betrayals when I wasn't big enough, and many managers left when the money wasn't good enough.

If you're unfortunate enough to be a sweetheart in an industry of vampires, people may mistake your "kindness for weakness"—I have Steve Brodsky to help for that quote.

Selected Marissa Nadler

- 1) *Little Hells*, 2009
- 2) *July*, 2014
- 3) *Droneflower* (w/ Steve Brodsky), 2019
- 4) *Strangers* (2016)

5) *For My Crimes* (2018)

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Fact




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