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As told to J. Bennett, 2494 words.

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# On finding your true self, working with others, and touring as a trans woman

**Musician Mina Caputo on her songwriting process, allowing songs to tell you what they need and want to be, and her experiences as a trans woman playing and touring in a rock band**

**Do you have an overall artistic philosophy or guiding light that you've followed throughout your career?**

First of all, I have OCD so one of the first things that I do—I know it's insane—but I've gotta vacuum and mop all my floors. I need to keep the floors super clean. It's weird—I go into a little cleaning spree before I execute this inspired feeling, because I'm very orderly, even at my work station, which is where all my watercolors are—and my journals and adult coloring books and more journals. I've got big shoeboxes of all loose poetry. It's a mess, but it's like an organized chaos. So I've got to clean and straighten up; I gotta dust my table where my computers are and shit.

Once everything's all cleaned up, then I turn on. If there isn't a drummer present, I'll create a loop or just an idea as a backbone. Then if it's going to be kind of a sad song, maybe I want to start with a vocal and piano. I'll lay down the piano part as a foundation first, with maybe just a click or a loop—just the bass or the bass drum or whatever. I'll lay down my piano and I'll lay down a quick scratch vocal track, and then I start building around it. I'll lay down acoustics, then electric guitars. It depends on what the song really needs. Because every song that I write or idea that comes to me, it's like poetry or prose coming out of fucking Burroughs' or Kerouac's mouth—the instruments pretty much present themselves to me.

**What do you mean by that? The instruments present themselves. You just kind of get a feeling that this song needs this or that?**

Yeah. For example, I'll be working on this piano and vocal kind of sad-old-man's-bar kind of song. Let's just say a solo part comes in or whatever. Intuition will be like, "Hey, how about rather than doing your typical nylon string acoustic solo, maybe we need an accordion. Let's get accordion in that." As parts build in the song, you record and you're cementing tracks on top of tracks. The instruments reveal themselves to me in that way.

On my 2007 solo record, *Fondness for Hometown Scars*, I wrote this song called "Bleed For Something Beautiful." The solo part had a gorgeous keyboard-generated alto saxophone throughout the track, so I wanted to get a saxophone player to mimic the stuff I laid down. But what happened was, the producer I was working with at that time said, "How adamant are you about having saxophone? Because let's call up [Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist and lifelong trumpet player] Flea and see if a muted trumpet would sound even better than the sax."

That's how shit like that happens. Flea winds up playing trumpet on the song and it even superseded the original idea of having an alto sax on the track. So you're writing and then the song starts telling you its meaning, because every song has its own life and I feel like the more you put into the song and the more you spend time with the song, the song is really telling you about itself—even though it came from you. The life that it takes on is beyond the life that you're giving it. Then it just tells you what the

song needs.

**You have this whole body of work as Keith Caputo and now you're building another body of work as Mina Caputo. Has the process or the philosophy behind it changed at all now that you've transitioned?**

No, I'm still the same me. A name is a name. But because I'm expressing my feminine way more than my masculine, it's more of a freedom—I'll tell you that. And I'm in a much happier state. I always thought you needed to be sad to write a great song, but for 20-something years I was very wrong about that. I happen to write incredible stuff while I'm feeling actually really fucking good.

In fact, that whole philosophy changed on me. When I'm really feeling bad, sometimes the last thing I want to do is pick up an acoustic guitar. I'd rather smash it on my fucking wall than write a song. I actually get more joy out of putting something into the here and now—reality—when I'm feeling good, because then when I go back and listen to the track, I can actually feel good about the energy that was put into it.

**Do you see it as two different phases of your career—the Keith phase and the Mina phase—or are they just different chapters of the same book?**

Yeah, just a different chapter. Again, you know—I was always this way. Now I just basically...I share my vulnerability with the world, even though half the world doesn't appreciate it, because everybody's afraid of their own fucking shadow—but yeah.

**When Life of Agony started, you were coming up in the very macho New York hardcore scene of the late '80s and early '90s. Was that especially difficult to navigate given what you were going through and the feelings you were having?**

Oh, absolutely. I wanted to fucking die every day. I mean, I was doing crazy drugs just so that would actually fucking happen. I felt like there was no escape for me—that the gods played a cruel joke on me. That's how I grew up feeling.

**Was there a specific moment when you decided, "Fuck this—I don't want to be this way anymore. I want to be the real me"—or was it a gradual process?**

There was a pinnacle moment in 2008 when I refused to even leave the house if I wasn't going to be the free person—the free spirit—that I needed to be in order to feel like I'm busy living instead of just busy dying. It was definitely a pinnacle moment. Actually, I was living in Amsterdam at the time and I couldn't leave my flat. I was hysterical crying in the middle of my apartment. I had to make some clear decisions about how I was going to continue living my life.

So I packed up and I journeyed back home to New York City, where I could start going through the medical hoops and obstacles—trying to convince all these medical professionals that I am who I say I am; I am what I believe I am. You've got to go through a bunch of fucking idiotic hoops. I had to go see gender therapists before I saw an endocrinologist. It was just this whole big fucking waste of time [because] I knew exactly what the fuck I was going through. I didn't need some therapist to tell me that I didn't know who the hell I was. But I don't believe in therapy, to be honest.

**Were you writing songs during this time, or was the whole process so overwhelming that you couldn't?**

No, I think I was writing. I'm always writing. I might not have been writing as much, but yeah, I probably was because this happened in 2008. Then in 2013, I released another solo record called *As Much Truth As One Can Bear*. So yeah, I must've been cooking up something while I was taking a break from my public life.

**Do you get a different kind of fulfillment from making solo records than you do from working with Life of Agony?**

It's fulfilling in a different way. There's a part of me that can't stand working with other people. I'd much rather work alone, because I don't even want to hear the voices of other people in my head. But then there's a part of me that absolutely loves to work with my Life of Agony family, and compromising doesn't really feel like compromising.

You know what I mean by that? Like when you're in a band, you're usually compromising things that you normally don't want to. But honestly, it's like a pleasure to compromise in the band because the love and respect is greater than it's ever been before.

**Why do you think you prefer to work alone?**

Because I'm a recluse. I'm a very isolated human being. My study time is very important to me. My reading, my quiet time, is very, very important. Like, honestly, I'd rather sit on my couch and read a book than do a side job that's going to make me \$1,000 that night. If I didn't like this job, this music job or something that I was getting, but it was making me killer money, I'd rather not take the money and live in the moment the way I really want to than constantly chasing false pleasures and stuff.

So for me to compromise, I need to do it joyously. That shows me I'm growing up and I've learned how to really work with people. I really enjoy it. I do. I like different ideas from different people—even if I don't agree. There's something cool about that, you know? "Okay, you didn't get your way but listen to this—this might be cool."

**You trust the people you work with to maybe come up with ideas that you wouldn't come up with yourself.**

Absolutely. I like that. I like not always giving myself the candy or the lollipop, you know what I mean? [laughs] I kind of like not always getting my way, because it teaches me about myself. That's the joy of compromising. I adore that.

Normally, I'm very different. I'd rather be alone. If it was up to me, I wouldn't even do rock shows anymore. I don't really care anymore. You might say I'd rather sit in the lab—in the studio—and keep making music that way. I don't even need to be in front of people, getting the floor.

**Why is that?**

I don't know. I guess you outgrow certain things. Yeah, it feels great and I love doing lounge shows and stuff but a part of me sometimes... I actually love being home more with my recording studio, being left alone, is what I mean by that. Just writing like a lunatic.

**The last time we talked, you mentioned how touring has become very different for you now that you're traveling as a trans woman. Is that part of why you don't feel like playing shows anymore?**

Yes and no. It's more a matter of like... my tastes have changed over the years. I like touring sometimes because being home for too long is torturous. For example, we were out on the road and then we've been home since June or July. And to be honest, I've been experiencing the intolerable in-betweens, where all I do now is... I'm missing my band family, I'm missing being on the road and I'm missing doing what I fucking do—being in people's faces whether they like me or not. [laughs] It depends on my mood. I'm so fucking moody, it's not even funny.

**What advice do you have for trans women going on tour?**

Make sure your pantyhose are tight. [chuckles] I don't know. You've just kind of got to put your best foot forward. What can you do, really? You're out there. There's no security, there's no safety in life. You can't do anything, really.

**Do you carry a weapon or anything like that?**

No, because here's the deal: When you think like that and you put a weapon in your bag, you're telling the universe that you're expecting trouble. I got my shit at home just in case someone wants to pop in my window—then it's over for them. But as far as out in the street or on the road, you can't fuck around like that, because you're basically inviting trouble.

It's like with all this advocating. What people don't realize is that the more you push against something, the louder it's going to become. That's the natural law of the universe. Look how loud Trump got. People have been pushing against him [since] before he even was elected. Guess what? All your pushing mechanics, all your fighting against, that's what got him elected.

**So you don't necessarily feel like you need to push against things that you disagree with?**

No, because when you accept and understand the laws of the universe, you allow life to happen. What do you think? You think little old Miss Mina Caputo is going to change the mind of every person that doesn't understand trans women or trans men? No. You think I want to fucking write a book, *Transsexuals For Dummies*? You think I'm living my life to teach all the fucking idiot closed-minded fear-based jack-offs that'll never really understand what I'm about? You think I'm here to try to convince people of that? No. You can't convince people of anything.

**Sad but true.**

People are fucking sad. Most people are sad in their own ways, especially the people that don't want to grow—especially the people that don't read or work on themselves or work on loving themselves. You can't change the world. There's nothing to change. I don't view the world as being broken. I truly don't. This is the law of nature. We need bad people so the good people can exist. We need good people so the bad people can exist. That's the nature of life. You think the cosmos is friendly? We're so lucky that we haven't gotten hit by another fucking meteorite.

**So what is your place in all this? You said you're not leading your life to convince anyone to accept you. What do you feel your purpose is?**

My purpose is to be creative, to live my life to the fullest, to learn how to love myself. In return, I love the world. My purpose in this life is to reach my most potential state of humanity that I possibly can. If you decide to walk with me, then great. If you don't walk with me, everyone's got their own path anyway. Everyone's got their own individual path of awareness and consciousness. I can only suss out my own life. I can't live for other people. I don't live for other people. I can set an example, but that's all I can really do.

Mina Caputo recommends:

*The Complete Short Stories of James Purdy* – He was very misunderstood. All the greats loved him—Paul Bowles, Patti Smith—and he was really prolific, but he was on the fringes of American writing. The guy was

unbelievable, but he was just completely ignored because of the way he confronted what people considered to be the norm. People are threatened by that sort of stuff. They don't wanna look at it. They fear growth. In any case, you should get the edition with the introduction by John Waters."

Name

Mina Caputo

Vocation


Musician, songwriter


Fact


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