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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3172 words.

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On growing along with your creative practice

Musician Mirah discusses how her recording process has changed over time, how technology informs the life of a working musician, and what it means to hold yourself accountable, both creatively and professionally.

You've been making records for a long time. Has your approach to writing and recording changed over the years?

I would say that the way that I make songs, write, and compose hasn't changed at all. The biggest thing that has changed for me as an artist, which is maybe a boring thing to have changed, has to do with what technology I'm using to record with. I think most people of my era would probably say the same. You know, even people who are still focused on using analog recording mediums probably have had experience with Pro Tools or other digital means at this point. I definitely spent the first full half of my recording career using either the old home versions of a cassette four-track. My first two or three records were mostly recorded that way, super low-fi. There wasn't a lot of subtlety to the engineering that I had done with my cassette four-track.

I did study recording engineering in college at Evergreen. I took an audio and media class, so it wasn't like all of this was completely new to me when I started recording stuff of my own. When I was given the key to Dub Narcotic studios to make my record, Calvin [Johnson] was like, "Sure, do what you want. Here are some really expensive old microphones. Don't break anything." I still had to have a written list of, "Turn this on then plug that thing in and then do this thing," but that's all I needed to know in order to record. It was fine. And that was all analog stuff.

Then, at a certain point, some of my collaborators and engineers who I was working with in different studios would be like, "Okay, now we're using this *other* thing." I went to school long enough ago that the digital audio program that I learned in college, I don't think it exists anymore.

At a certain point more people around me were starting to use digital equipment and I didn't start using it myself until making *Understanding*, my most recent record. I was like, "This is silly that I don't know how to use this thing." So I just taught myself rudimentary Pro Tools skills and basically use it like a fancy four-track with unlimited tracks. I use it in a pretty basic way, but that's all I need to get my ideas down, and those are happening in the same way as they always have in terms of songwriting. I don't go deep into the plug-ins world. I just can't go there because even the fact that part of my recording and my creative experience is spent physically looking at a screen can be a bummer. I really don't enjoy that part of it. There are conveniences about it that I really do enjoy, but I definitely get overwhelmed with choices.

For instance, I always notice that the feeling of writing and even the quality of the writing or the voice that I'm using changes if I'm writing by hand as compared to a using manual typewriter or a computer. I feel like the tone, the quality, and the experience are completely different for those three things. I like the tone and quality and feeling of an analog life. I enjoy that. But there are certain conveniences afforded by digital recording media that I like, too. I could travel with this little set-up and then record all the demos for *Understanding* with this miniature set-up that I could fit in my backpack.

I like placing limitations on things. I guess in a certain way I keep myself limited by maintaining some naiveté about technologies like Pro Tools. I don't know what everything is in those drop-down menus, but also I don't want to know everything because it's too much and I feel like it would interfere with my innocent, spazzy, enthusiastic urges to make whatever recording I'm making.

All of these tools can be empowering, but at the end of the day they are just that: tools. It's interesting to see so many people trying to get back to more analog processes—like making zines or more artisanal creative processes—just as a way of having a break from looking at electronic devices and screens.

Totally. Luckily, because of the medium that I work in, there's a whole process that happens *before* I even start recording. I am rarely composing while also multi-track recording. I am essentially a songwriter and my musical compositions are a sort of costume for the song. The song is the thing that I do.

The process of writing the song doesn't happen with any microphones on, except maybe I'll grab my phone since that's the easiest thing to just get the idea down. Generally it's literally like I have a pen, I have paper, I have a guitar or sometimes a keyboard. Sometimes I'm just walking around, and that experience, that's the kernel where the emotional experience of creating remains. And then later there's this whole fun part where I get to make a recording, and that is also emotionally engaging, but it's just a different part of the process. It's a little bit more like playing dress-up or going and banging on things. It's slightly more physical and external, whereas writing the song is more internal.

On the newest record, the last track, "Energy," is largely made up of a phone memo recording of me just having written the song. It felt slightly risky to have that be on the record because it's messy or whatever—not that I've ever been afraid of sharing messy recordings—but especially in the context of the whole album and some of my more recent recordings, it's a little vulnerable to share something that feels super raw and not fully worked out. I like that though. That's the kernel of my process. So I was like, "Here everybody! This is this beautiful, tender part of what I do. It's not flashy, but this is what I was really feeling."

Having made a lot of records at this point, do you find that in some ways you can relax into your process a little more? Like maybe there is less urgency to say everything about everything whenever you make a record, or more of an understanding that even if you have a million great ideas, you don't have to use all of them?

I can really only speak for myself and my own experience of growing up/aging while being a working musician, but kind of across the board—not just related to my creative work—there's a sort of relaxing that happens. Once you just start stacking up enough life experiences—both incredible, awesome things and super painful things—it's like you just have to kind of say, "Oh, I get it! I'm here for a while."

I just have to stay centered and experience these things without having every moment be this heightened drama. Even the painful things, they suck, but I'm still here, you know? So it's a little bit less of, "This bad thing happened and my life is over!" Not to say I don't ever do that. I mean, I'm an extremely emotional person, so it's not like I just zen out and don't react anymore. That's not what I'm saying at all. But there's just a certain kind of acceptance, or a more relaxed feeling that you hopefully gain as you get older. That can't help but creep into your work as well.

You've experienced the music industry in a variety of different phases and formats. What it means to be a working musician can look very different these days as opposed to how it might have been in the early '90s.

That's definitely true. Even just the things that are on my to-do list now, on my radar, they didn't exist before. Even playing shows now—the way that show publicity happens. I've been in a situation many times in the last couple of years where I literally have to specifically request that the promoter make physical posters and put them up. You know, I'm not really on Facebook, so there must be other people that aren't there either, right? I realize how this makes me sound. Now no one's on Facebook because everyone's on whatever other social media thing. But still, the posters just don't happen anymore and it's like that's just no longer a job for a promoter. I'm like, "What's wrong with a poster? It's actually a really useful way to communicate with your town or your city."

I feel like there are a million things that are still totally valid aspects of "the old way" of doing things that are still really functional and useful, but it's like people don't even think of doing them anymore because they've had 20,000 new ways of doing things cycle through really quickly. I'm more of a fan of stable things. Things you can count on. And people. You can count on people, you can count on people seeing things around their neighborhood. You can't always count on a lot of internet-based communication. That doesn't seem very stable to me. At the same time, I'm like, "Okay, strategically I guess there's good reason to try to do some of these things, because they're here right now." I'm not totally a recluse in a cabin with no computer or anything. I try to do the stuff.

It's funny, I think that my relationship to social media is actually just a carry-over from my younger days. I'm maybe the only person I know who didn't make a zine in the '90s. I never made a zine because even though I write these songs and put out albums that are very personal and I'm sharing a lot about myself personally, there was something about writing a zine that felt like, "Oh god! It's too close, too personal!" I couldn't get myself to do it.

And there's something about a lot of the ways that I see people using social media that strikes that same kind of chord in me. I'm like, "Which voice am I using? Who am I talking to?" There's something that's confusing about it to me and feels too exposed. The number of times that my band mates are like, "What are you doing?" And I'll have been sitting in the van on my phone trying to compose the thing for my Instagram picture and it takes me a million years because I'm like, "But who am I talking to?" I don't even know.

When it comes to writing and making things, are you a creature of habit? Do you depend on routines?

I don't have a daily writing practice. I can set myself up for a certain period of time where I have a very specific schedule of, "Oh, I'm writing in the morning for this specific amount of time." That is why the residencies I've had in the past couple of years have been awesome for me, because it's a place that I go where I can do that, which is easier than doing it at home. I tend to be like, "Okay, this month my schedule's gonna be like this and I'm gonna pick up my guitar for this hour every day." I guess it's partly because I feel like my whole adult life has had so many schedule interruptions. I can't be like, "Yes, this is what the everyday looks like," because it doesn't stretch out that far for me. I can do

between four, eight, or sometimes even 10-week stretches where I have my regimen and I can stick to it. But because I go away so much, that's been a struggle. I'm a Virgo. I like stable things and I'm kind of happier when I have a schedule, which is why it's so funny that I've chosen this life.

For a lot of musicians, even the chaos of touring feels stable in a way because it's a routine. You're going to the next place, you're setting up, you're playing the show, you're taking your stuff down, you're going to the next place. The routine of it feels safe in some way. For a lot of musicians I know, it's when they get home and they have nothing to do that their life suddenly goes haywire.

That is true. The tour that I just had was an unusual example of that. So, right now I am six month's pregnant and just two weeks before my last tour started, my dad died. And I was maybe not gonna go on the tour. Like, how could I? It just seemed so impossible. I was close with my dad. I have a close family. It was this devastating experience. I waited until the very last minute to decide whether or not to do it, but in the end I decided to do the tour. Not that there weren't hard parts about it and not that I didn't have some parts of the tour where I was like, "I wish I had just 10 more minutes every day where I could just be alone and cry somewhere, where I'm just by myself." It's always hard to be alone on tour and have time and space. But at the same time, that tour provided me with structure and this thing that I really love doing. I love playing music. And I was being held by the schedule.

Coming home after tour, even though it feels like I can sort of just relax a little bit into my own feelings and I can have more alone time and just time to process, it's also hard being home and not having the structure and the sort of built-in, "Yeah, I'm playing music for an hour and a half or two hours including soundcheck, every day." Still, I try to make myself accountable. I'm a person who believes in accountability. I feel like that's one of these important concepts that, if it was more prominent, then people would be better people. It would be a better world. I think about that and then I'm like, "God, who am I to talk? Look at my life!" I don't have a schedule. Now I don't even have a label, I just decide everything myself. Who am I to talk about accountability? All you can do is the best you can, you know? That's what I'm trying to do.

Mirah recommends:

I feel like it is so important to give yourself a new view from time to time. Living here in New York City, for example, there are a million things that all of us have never seen or done. Sometimes you just need a different view of the city. What does it look like from a boat? It's good to look at something that you feel like you are so familiar with, but from a different angle or vantage point. The speed of the world is so fast and so exhausting, it's really so important to just give yourself time to observe.

This past summer I spent a lot of time at my dad's house. I grew up in that house, in that neighborhood. I walked and rode my bike all over that neighborhood. But this summer I went on some walks and found myself on streets within a mile of of my dad's house that I had never been on before. I looked at that street that I grew up on from this place that I'd never looked from before. It was a good experience. I guess for some people this impulse takes the shape of something like, "I'm gonna travel around the world!" and that's certainly another way to get some perspective on your familiar life, by going really far away. But that's not always possible for a variety of reasons. Sometimes you really only just need a slight shift in order to look at things differently.

This is a funny one because not everybody can do it, but it's very interesting being pregnant. I'm not a person who always dreamed of having a baby or being pregnant. But you know, it was like, "Hey, I'm 44, how about now?" It's been pretty fascinating, not just the physical experience, but also the perspective it gives you. I haven't had the baby yet, but you can't help but start looking at things from a different vantage point. It's like, "My god, this is how we all got here." And now there's a person inside my body. What? Like, a person in there moving around. It's so wild. Maybe some people can touch into that concept and experience without actually having experienced it, but I don't think I really did. It always occurred to me like, "Wow! That's so weird." But it's different really thinking about it from this physical place of, "Oh my god, this is how all humans got here." All of us were carried inside the bodies of our mothers and we wouldn't have gotten there if not for the bodies of our fathers. I don't know, it's a cool way to connect to like, everything. I think it is even more true for those of us who ended up doing this later because we've had this whole independent life, you know? I've been around for 44 years, it's kind of a long while to be used to just being me.

I think it's also important to do things that you are scared of doing. Even if you never get totally unscared. Don't terrorize yourself, but at least give those things a try. For me this has to do with my relationship with swimming and water. When I was little, I could only feel my fear. And at a certain point I realized that, actually, I love water. It's just that I'm also kind of scared of it. And there are things about it that make my stomach do jumping jacks. What is that feeling? And why do I have it? It's been an important thing for me to do, to not let my fear stop me from experiencing the joys and the pleasures of things. So when it comes to things that we fear, maybe just allow yourself to try it just a little bit.

I think about the fact that for a lot of people, playing music, or singing, or dancing—things that I think of as everyday things—other people find scary. People feel not free to do them. So I say, even if it's just you alone in your living room, just let yourself dance. Like, once a week, even if it's just for one minute. When anything scares us it usually means that there's some kind of energy there, some charge, which makes it an interesting thing to explore. So maybe do that, but in a way in which you still feel safe.

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Vocation
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Fact




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