

On how your creative work guides you



Musician Olivia Kaplan discusses talking to yourself through your art, saying things without the fluff, and the beauty of not editing yourself.

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As told to Lauren Spear, 1515 words.

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You are a seasoned songwriter and release music under your own name. But before that, you studied Ethnomusicology. What was your focus?

My program was grounded in sociology and anthropology of music. I spent a lot of time with traditional music from the Near East and a little Hindustani classical music. It wasn't a performance degree which I liked—more just understanding music through an ethnographic lens, but I did learn some oud and sitar. I wrote my final paper of ecstatic music of the famous Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum and this epic she sings about her lover.

Having had that education, do you feel like you see your music as existing in a larger historical context?

It was great to spend time with music I would probably have never encountered in any meaningful way and thinking about why music is necessary and performed. This was all in conjunction with me beginning to brand myself as an "indie musician" so being taught by oud and sitar virtuosos and scholars of Chinese tea room music who could give a fuck about Pitchfork was a nice reality check. I don't know if I'm making music representative of this time in history as much as I'm just carrying on the human thing of story-telling and singing about love and longing. That exists everywhere and has forever.

Do you think there are any songs out there that can remain timeless throughout history?

Oh my gosh, so many. "Mercy, Mercy Me," "A Case of You," maybe "Danny Boy"—which I heard live recently and might be the saddest song ever—if you look up who wrote it, it just says "celtic women" which I love.

Lullabies are timeless.

I don't know what genre or category these are but "protest or political songs" feels wrong to say. I think songs addressing relevant social issues will be timeless but definitely not always good or stylish. Generally, I find it very cool when an artist or band can find an interesting and musical way to point out the hypocrisy of the powers at be, class and inequities of this world's songs. Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Kanye (I'm thinking *College Dropout*). The Weather Station has carried the torch nicely in her recent music—she wrote one of my favorite records of the last few years which kind of grieves our current environmental crisis in a very personal way.

Do your songs feel political?

Not really, but I try to feed the belief that putting out music makes a difference and art is a necessary limb of

society. In my day-job as an elementary school teacher, I feel much more immediately useful as a citizen. I don't go out of my way to make political statements with my music. Someone, somewhere said that sadness is a very valid response to things happening on a national and global scale, so that's what usually comes out—every now and then I'm angry, too.

Do you ever grapple with your position as a songwriter?

I grapple with the whole thing as a career every day—like, “what is the point?” But when the songs come out I'm pretty grateful, and mystified and excited. I don't question what's coming out because I assume that it needs to. I'm not going to feel anything that hasn't been felt before, which is a very comforting reality. There's so much to question and there's so much to doubt in making this a career, that the song and the songwriting itself isn't the thing too.

That's a really lovely thought. Because the feelings are universal, but the way that you articulate them is specific to you.

Totally. It happened recently when I was listening to Feist's song, “Love Who We Are Meant To.” The way she articulated this simple sentiment that I'd probably heard before, but for some reason it sounds like I'm hearing it for the first time. I usually come back to an artist because of how they say the simple things.

What do you think you are looking for in your own songs?

I think more or less the same kind of standard. I don't have the widest harmonic vocabulary, so I'm usually confined by the limits of my instrumental skills. I take lyric writing more seriously because it's where I feel like I have more dexterity. Nowadays, I hold myself to a higher standard of being more thorough. Earlier in my writing process, I'd be fine with verses that nobody could really follow. To a certain degree, if it makes sense to you, that's fine. But as I get older, I'm getting less lazy about that.

Is the goal, then, for your listener to understand what you're saying?

The goal is to get the feeling down till I think there's nothing more and there's nothing less that I have to say. That I'm not leaning on anything as fluff, I guess. I'm anti-fluff.

Sometimes it's the first thought that is the best thought and I don't have to look back. When I was writing my song “Talking to the Dead” the words just kind of came out. There wasn't a lot of editing there and if you look closely. I'm not sure if it makes any sense, but I feel them deeply. There's some beauty in not editing yourself.

Do you feel like your editing process has changed over the years?

I think I used to be looser than I am now. I kind of edit as I go, and it's just a fucking slog and a half to ever get it finished. Is a song ever finished? Who knows? I do think that once it's recorded, there's no turning back, there it is.

Do you have any point people that you turn to when you've finished a song?

Sometimes I'll show my sister. I used to send my friend every voice memo I made because I could always rely on her to make me feel like a genius. I have people that I turn to for recording that I lean on heavily to help my recorded music sound good. It's a very solitary process, my writing. I don't really take a lot of suggestions. I've only recently opened up to co-writing for other people, but I'm really enjoying that.

When you're writing for other people, do you say things that you wouldn't say yourself?

Yeah, for sure. There's so much freedom. You get to write about the secret parts of yourself, the alternative

realities and fantasies.

Do you feel like you write from experience more, or imagination?

Experience, mostly or like, projections of my experience that are muddled with things I wish I had experienced. I try to be a pretty light and positive person, but it's evident when people listen to my music that there's a lot of darkness that I hold onto. I often attempt to write about other people's pain, which requires imagination. I have been writing about grief recently which is kind of new. That writing is a combination of both—because grief unlocks these crazy ways of thinking. Like, all of a sudden you're someone who talks to dead people and you start experiencing time differently.

There's this weird thing that happened where a lot of the songs on my record *Tonight Turns To Nothing* became very true after the fact. I wrote a song called "Temporary Thing" for a few of my close friends who had lost mothers. It's about some sort of visitation, in which you kind of feel the spirit or momentarily remember the shape of the person you lost. At the time, I knew nothing about that feeling, but now I do and I find listening to that song to be kind of eerily on point.

Has there ever been a time when you wrote a song that revealed something to yourself that was hidden?

I was talking recently talking to my friend about how the subconscious operates in songwriting. I think for a lot of songwriters, we can spend a lot of energy dissecting something or someone we know, love, or who has tormented us in some way but more often than not I find out I'm talking to myself in some capacity. That might be very Psych 101, but it's true. My song "Still Strangers" is a good example of that—every time I sing it live for people, I remember the ways I was complicit in inflicting the pain that I'm blaming someone else for causing. I often end up seeing the counter argument to all my convictions through my songs. They kind of guide me to the nuance and help me find some peace within the gray areas.

Olivia Kaplan Recommends:

Spending time and having conversations with kids

American Masters on Eve Hesse

Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson

Bill Withers live performance "Hope She'll be Happier" 1974

Two Volcano documentaries: *Into the Inferno* and *Fire of Love*

Name

Olivia Kaplan

Vocation

musician

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Jennelle Fong