

On the joy that comes from making work you believe in



Musician Sarah Beth Tomberlin on charting your own path, being accountable to your community, knowing when a song's finished, and the ongoing process of building a creative life.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 4216 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Day jobs](#), [Success](#).

You have collaborators, but you're writing the music, and Tomberlin is your project. How do you maintain a schedule and continue to make work if you don't have a regular bandmate checking in to make sure you're doing things?

That's a question that I ask myself a lot. The thing is, when I started making music, I wasn't thinking about what would happen with it, or where it would go. I just wasn't prepared. With [my first album], *At Weddings*, everything happened differently than I feel like it happens for a lot of people, the order of things, so it wasn't even like I thought, "I'm a songwriter." I was just trying to write my best songs, and then I realized, "Oh, this is a collection of songs that I could maybe do something with." Now that it's my job, it is interesting to try to find a consistent way to set aside time to tap into that situation. I was writing before as a form of respite, and it's still that way. But it's also naturally shifted in the way I need to be working towards this.

Recently, COVID-safe style, I have been meeting up with my friend, John, once a week in LA and just playing music together. I'll share new songs that I'm working on. He shares new songs he's working on, and then we've been jamming, which is literally my first time ever doing that. I didn't grow up in a music scene of any sort or have friends that played music. I was homeschooled, so all my friends were from church or homeschool co-op.

That's been a huge thing for both of us. He's in a band, but he was just like, "There are some months where I just don't pick up my guitar, and I don't like that. But it's just hard to set aside that time." So we had the idea to start meeting and doing this. There are no expectations; we meet up and talk about our week and what we've been processing and thinking about and what's going on internally in our inner world and externally and then share music together. During the week, we email back and forth different ideas or voice demos. It's encouraging because there are no expectations. It's been nourishing for me to be inspired to keep at it.

But, it's a new thing for me. How I would answer your question has changed now that I have more time [due to Covid]. Before, I was on tour all the time, and I didn't have consistent time to write. Last year, I think the longest time I had off between tours was three weeks. It was anxiety-inducing because I was like, "I really need to follow this idea through now, because I don't know when I'll have time again to do it." During the second week of John and I doing it, I got teary, and I was like, "Dude, I've never had this before."

When you didn't know other people in bands, how did you start making songs? Was it through singing in church, and then moving into, "I'm going to adapt this into my own work"?

Yes and no. Definitely, yes, to the church influence, because there was never not a time that we didn't go to church. I grew up singing. My sisters sang. My mom sings. All the home videos of me, I was mostly walking around singing and making up songs, so it was not shocking to anyone that I made music. I really enjoyed creative writing and writing stories and poems. That was always something I was interested in, but I never saw it as something I could do because I did think I needed a scene. I would help "lead worship" in church, I sang in choir, and I did all-state youth choir for two summers, but it was just a part of my life and I didn't see it as a practice or a job. It was just something that I enjoyed and loved.

I started trying to write songs on guitar when I was 11 or 12 because I got a guitar for Christmas. It was yellow, and the middle cutout was a heart. I remember being slightly annoyed at my parents because I thought that they were trying to feminize me and they knew that that was not the situation. I was a tomboy back in the day when being a girl who liked to wear boys clothes and run around outside all day meant you were a tomboy? Anyway, they also got me an Easy Chords for Beginner book, but I didn't understand how to read it. I probably wasn't patient enough.

They didn't really have money for lessons. Honestly, I also felt like they knew that I wasn't going to use the guitar playing for Jesus, and they were like, "Okay, we gave you piano lessons for a little bit when you were younger, and you just played by ear." Those weren't really beneficial to me because I just would play what I heard. When I started actually playing was probably 17, like actually attempting and just giving up on learning chords and just playing what felt right.

How do you think learning on your own affected the music you make? With that solitary beginning in mind, I can see why the "jamming"'s felt so important. Do you think a more collaborative beginning would have shifted the way you make music? Like, maybe you developed more personal style by having to figure out on your own without having a clear path ahead of you.

Yeah. I think a big part of it is just the camaraderie and encouragement, and not abandoning something because you're the only one reflecting back to yourself your ideas. So, if something's difficult or doesn't click maybe right away, it's easy to abandon that idea or thought. With another person, and the trust there, you keep going. But, it's not that way with everybody. This is a special situation. I'm pretty shy when it comes to this sort of thing.

Encouragement is a big factor. I can talk down to myself by myself and get away with it because I'm the only one there, but in front of a person, they're like, "Okay, come on. You got that." Or, "You know what you want."

It's the same with producing, the idea of being a producer. Or, it's like, even if I can't play all of these instruments, I know what I want that part to be like. With the EP, there were some bass lines that Sam was playing, and I was like, "That's cool, but what about this." And I would just sing it, and then he played it. I'm like, "That's perfect." You know? That's me producing.

Meeting artists that encourage my own intuition has been really helpful, where it's not just like, "Oh, well. I can do it for you." Or, "I hear this." It's more, "I also hear this." Other ideas flow out of sharing stuff, too. It's been helpful making it low pressure. John and I, neither of us are like, "This is my idea," or "You have to keep this idea." We're just literally playing songs for each other in this living room and then talking it out, like what it brings up.

Does it feel collaborative or does it feel more about the support, to keep things going?

I'm very careful about who I want to be around, in work and my personal time. I'm down to make music with anybody and share things, because my process has been so insular, it is a very sacred thing to me to open up that space and invite someone into it. So I just always am careful to make sure we're on the same page concerning boundaries.

Even with John, it's just like we talk about boundaries, struggles, and fears that we have. So then there's no weirdness in the space. And no fear of not being able to say something. We meet once a week, and then we talk

about that. We're just like, "How was your week?" And then, "How did you feel about last week? Are there any fears or anxieties?" It wasn't like, "We must go through things before we start each week." It just is flowing organically and also building our friendship, too. I think a creative life is just you building a life that is nourishing to you and then out flows the work. That's what I'm striving for.

Do you imagine this continuing when quarantine ends and touring starts again?

I definitely want to maintain something in this form, but also know that with touring it'll be more difficult. This pause has been useful for many reasons. When I started touring I was just like, "Okay, now I must do the job and show people that I'm committed and tour until I'm dead." That kind of thing. While that's okay, and I really enjoy touring, it's also a double-edge sword. You're not able to put roots down in your community. You're not able to be a part of your community in a consistent way.

That's where stuff gets messy. You're not able to be accountable to your community. And social media gets weird because you're really posting just to promote shows. You're also posting to be like, "Community, I'll be back. Remember that I exist and am here."

But yeah, meeting up and having time to play lifts so much doom and gloom vibes from me; to just have the time to have maintenance check basically, to look at my life, and where I'm living and to surround myself with people that offer a nourishing, reciprocal friendship. To do my part in tending to myself and my community.

It's different than meeting people in green rooms and hanging out. It's different having someone in your city, and part of your community, where I'm like, "I just get to come over to your house and we get to talk and play music." That's such a gift.

When touring does happen again, do you want to change the way you do it?

Definitely. I mean, I would love to make a living off of this for the rest of my life, but I don't think that I have to just do music. I'm not like, "I'm just an artist and I can't work a coffee job or a food industry job." It's just like, whatever way that it's sustainable for me as a human being, one that's ever changing and adapting and growing and learning about myself and what I can handle and what space I need to have that channel open to make songs that I'm proud of that I feel like are better than the last batch.

It's really not about how popular I become or how much money I can acquire doing it. I see people that have that, and they're completely miserable. Everybody knows that trope like, "Well, you could have everything in the world and still be so sad." It's true, and I truly just want to build a life where I'm learning and being able to be accountable to my community and being able to invest in my community. I think that that looks a lot different than the touring I did last year, where the only months I didn't tour were July and December, and I moved in July. And in December I recorded an EP. I don't think that that's sustainable.

Of course, it doesn't happen like that all the time. You tour when you have something to promote, but I definitely think, especially when we're thinking about climate change and how flying and driving across the country in a van is not ecologically sustainable. So it's like, yes, you do have to make money and yes, you do have to find ways to do that. I don't know all of the answers, but it has made me pause and think, "Okay, now that you have a moment to realize that you are contributing to this system and you understand more that there are things that are not sustainable about this, and dangerous even, what are you going to use this time that you've been given to reflect on?" Instead of just being like, "Well, this is just the way it is and it fucking sucks, and I'm going to complain about it constantly." It's like, what are creative ideas of how to make this sustainable?

I think about people like Joanna Newsom or Liz Harris, people who don't tour constantly. They're just like, "This is when I tour and this is when it's going to be. Sorry if you can't make it." I truly respect that. They're at different places than I am in their careers, but I feel like they basically set a boundary, and people will be like, "I respect that," or they won't.

To go back to what you were saying about day jobs: They can be a very useful thing that frees you up to make the right decisions for your creative project, so you're not so dependent on that one guarantee that if forces you to make do things you don't want to do.

Yeah, it puts a whole skewed vision of what you're actually doing. I wrote the majority of *At Weddings* when I was working 40 to 45 hours a week at a Verizon store doing sales and going to community college 15 hours a week. I had no life. Literally, I worked every day or went to school. I wrote the record during that time, and that was because it was my thing. It was the thing that was respite for me and something that was for me. I wasn't intending for people to hear it. I was just working at something that I loved and was passionate about.

Some people just truly love music. I was living in rural southern Illinois and driving two hours to St. Louis to see a show and two hours back and not feeling any way about it other than complete bliss and joy. So happy to do that, so thankful to have a car to get me there. I would make a day out of it, go to my coffee shop, go to Vintage Vinyl, go to get a taco, go to the show... I was completely blissed-out by that. Sure, I might think, "Oh, I wish I could go to shows nearby," but I didn't even see it a, "Oh fuck, I have to drive to St. Louis." It was just passion. This will sound very mystical, but: I think that if you're passionate about something and you're open, the world opens up to you when you're genuinely just trying to connect to the thing that moves you and the thing that puts fire underneath you to live life. It finds you when you're open to it.

Do you still find respite in making music? Now that people are paying attention, have you been able to locate that same feeling you had as when nobody was listening?

I don't find it difficult thinking about people hearing it until after it's written, and then I'm like, "Is that too much?" A lot of the reason I don't want to write all the time or why I put it off is because I know that it takes a hefty amount of emotional energy out of me. It is truly like slicing open something inside of you and just letting it flow. I read [an interview with Tori Amos](#), who I adore, and the interviewer was asking, "How do you write songs?" And she was like, "Well, it's just an open channel. It's a channel, like the spirit." Like, "I open myself up to it and it comes and then the song is written." That's true. I never knew how to put words to that feeling, but that's definitely how I write songs.

Most of my songs, I would say 90% of my songs, are written in one sitting. That doesn't mean it's like "do, do, do, do do..." It's one day of several hours chipping away at it or something. But a lot of the time why I'm putting that off is because it literally takes the life out of me. I know that I'm going to be rendered useless the rest of the day.

That's different than just playing a guitar melody or something that you like and listening to it over and over again. That feels more like playing around. Sometimes that works, but a lot of the time it's just been being open and the thing comes. I have no idea what is happening. I'm just more afraid of that because it's really powerful. I'm not even thinking about people yet. After it's written, then I'm like, "Oh fuck, people are going to hear this and perceive this."

I do think I had an onset of writer's block directly after the record was "well received" because I had no expectations for it, and it blew up in a really strange way to me. I just wasn't expecting anything. So, yeah, I think I was just more afraid of "Oh, now I have to do this again," than being like, "Oh, people will hear this." Now it's just moved to a thing where I'm like, "I should be working at this more than I am." Discovering my struggles and adjusting and growing in my practice.

Eileen Myles has said that poetry will come to them at random times, so they have to always be aware of that moment and be ready to take note of it. It could happen while watching TV, walking your dog, whatever.

Yeah, definitely. Sometimes you're hanging out with someone or it's not a place where you can pause. I do write a lot in my phone notes. That's always where I've written lyrics and ideas, and I would write in class. "[Any Other Way](#)" was one of the songs where something struck me, a line, and then I just started writing and the rest came. I had no idea what was happening. It was like we were in class watching a biology documentary, and I was in this other place. "[You Are Here](#)" was written after a day at a hotel with my parents; I saw the [You Are Here](#) fire

escape plan, and then wrote "You Are Here" in the car.

How do you know when a song's finished?

I like playing new songs live to see how it feels and see if as I'm playing and connecting to it if I feel the feeling. Because I'm sharing it, and I know that people are hearing it. But I'm not really focusing on that. I'm focusing on: Even though I'm in front of a bunch of strangers who maybe don't want to hear this, do I feel connected to it in this space where there's a chaotic energy going on?

That's a way that I figure that out sometimes, but obviously that's not really happening anymore. So something that I've tried to do is just I'll play something a bunch, and then I'll record it. And then I'll play it again, and then I'll record it because I know that it'll shift. Maybe something else will come up. Then I pause. I take a break. I don't listen to it. Maybe I listen to it in a few days, and then I'm like, "Oh, I hear it differently. I could be saying this thing more clearly," or another idea springs up for something that just feels like it serves the song better.

I don't really ever know when a song is finished. I think I decide it's finished when I'm recording it and I'm like, "Okay, now it's finished because yeah, we're recording it and this is the thing." But I don't feel greedy about being like, "This is a finished song." I feel like I can change it if I want to. Even if I'm playing it, it's like I don't connect to a word or a phrasing, I can change it.

I hadn't played any shows when Saddle Creek signed me. I had to learn all of that quickly. It's different than it was singing in church. You're singing your own songs. The way that I got past it was just like, "I'm in my room singing to myself." I remember either what I was feeling when I wrote the song or I try to understand this song more than when I wrote it. Or I just lean into the fact that I get to share the song right then and hopefully it's helpful to someone.

A song is finished when you connect to it and you don't feel like you're lying. That's how I feel, but that changes as we change.

Yeah, music is connected to a community. It's not something that lives in a vacuum. Now that we're separate from a community a lot of the time, I wonder if it feels different when you're writing music? You don't get to test it out in front of an audience, for one. I know that's part of your weekly collaboration—finding a way to get feedback. I'm curious, though, if quarantine keeps going, how do you keep going?

One thing I'm currently excited about is having time with myself and asking, "What moves me? What am I interested in? What do I love? What do I not love? What makes me feel connected to myself and connected to the earth and connected to the people around me?" That's a big part of being able to have space to collaborate with people. If I don't have that space with myself then there's not going to be anything to give from; there's not going to be a well of which to bring up and splash around. It's just going to be dry and gross, and no one's going to come out of that feeling good, because I'm going to be looking for it in them, and if they don't reflect back to me what I'm looking for within myself, it's going to be not good. I'm going to feel anxious or frustrated or misunderstood.

So a large portion of this is working on myself and having time to be with myself. That looks like not distracting myself. That looks like maybe being upset and being like, "Okay, I'm upset. What can I do to soothe myself, or what needs tending to?" Or like, "Okay, I'm feeling this immense amount of joy, but I don't need to vomit that really all over the place. I need to tend to that and reflect on what or why that is." A big portion of making music with other people is having time with yourself to feel out your own ideas. Like, all of my demos forever have been iPhone voice demos. I used to get really excited and send a song to someone right away. Then they'd say something that I was not ready to hear. It wouldn't be like, "This sucks." It would just be something, and I hadn't spent time with the song yet, and I decided to invite someone else into perceiving it. I was not prepared for that to happen, actually, even if it was good.

That's time. That's time and space and solitude. That's what we're learning now. There are dark, dark spots and

dark days, but to have to sit with that and not be able to distract yourself and be like, "Okay. Well, what is this?" And to discover it and investigate it and be thankful to have the time to do that instead of just swallowing the feeling and moving past it and thinking that that's strength like, "Bye, see you." Strength is actually seeing the thing and facing it and considering, "Okay. Well, let's tend to this and work on this." And not just asking other people to sweep it up with you when you haven't even grabbed the broom yourself yet.

Sarah Beth Tomberlin Recommends:

Several helpful things...

good wireless headphones (not earbuds-headphones)

writing letters with far away friends

trusty bedside companions: a tarot deck, a candle, a glass of water, a journal, and at least one book, but here are three right now in my current rotation (non fiction: *the body keeps the score* by dr. bessel van der kolk , fiction: *the overstory* by richard powers, poetry: *life on mars* by tracy k smith)

south of france french milled bar soap gardenia scent – the best

a criterion channel subscription

spending time by or in a body of water whenever possible

jumping jacks for nervousness and anxiety

extremely hot baths

daily walks

writing lists

keeping your phone in another room while you sleep

veggie dumplings

practicing patience

Name

Sarah Beth Tomberlin

Vocation

Musician

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Felix Walworth