On not forcing it

Musicians Julia Cumming and Nick Kivlen (Sunflower Bean) discuss the low points of making art, working with the subconscious, and allowing life to unfold where it may.

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As told to Sarah John, 1943 words.

Tags: Music, Adversity, Process, Collaboration, Family.

There was a period of time where creative differences were causing some stress in the band's relationship, but you guys have reconciled now. What lessons did you learn from that experience?

Julia Cumming: It's a very complex thing. I think we reached an impasse. It's like, you're trying to get the car started, you have the key in there, you're trying to get all the sparks going. We just couldn't light them up in a way that felt authentic to any of us. It wasn't this huge, huge blowout, thank god. I think it also spoke to how much we cared about the music and the process—that we couldn't force something that wasn't happening in that way. Once we realized we couldn't force it, we just had to stop.

You never know where you are in the story. I say that to myself and I say that to my friends a lot. That was a moment where we were feeling very afraid about our creative collaboration. We didn't know where it was going. Now, we're a few days from this record being out, and I'm reading people say how the songs made them feel. Seeing everything that we were able to accomplish when we did come together, with that serendipity, I'm just grateful for all the different parts of the experience.

Because art adjacent stuff is fun, a lot of people think that the process of making the art should also be fun. Sometimes it's really exciting and cool and sometimes it is fun. [But low points] just mean that I now have a way different perspective. I have more insight on how those lower and more challenging moments can actually mean really great things for the work eventually.

I know this is probably a bit of a sensitive topic. Julia, one of the songs you wrote on the new record is about being sexually abused. First off, I'm really sorry that happened to you. It's very intense to make art about something like that. What made you realize you were ready to write about that experience?

Julia: Well, first of all, I want to thank you for your question because some people have brought this up to me in interviews in very crass and random ways.

I'm sure.

Which has been really surprising, actually. When that happens, I'm just like, "Fuck this, I'm not going to talk about it." Context-wise, I didn't expect that song to be a single. That was kind of chosen as a team. I thought that it was going to be a really powerful touchpoint on the record. I think the way that it musically came out helped tie in our other singles, and helped tie in the sound of the record. That was one of the reasons that it happened. I even talked to the label and I said, "Should we even put out a single that is dealing with something like this?" I have to thank Lucky Number for saying, "I think it's good that this is a song that is actually saying something. It has a reason to exist."

It was a song that I had worked on with Olive [Faber, the band's drummer] a couple of years prior to making the record. I had gone to the studio one day with her and I had been playing with it for a while… I never expected to do anything with it. That's the cool thing about having an ongoing creative process. Sometimes you have these feelings and they arrive in song form and then you make them, and sometimes there's nowhere for them to go. That's okay because you got to do it.

When we were putting this record together, we had started to get the idea of what we wanted it to sound like. We were looking at this kind of really naturalistic sound. I started looking for songs that had that quality. Along with this, these religious phrases kept coming up for us. I remembered that song and I remembered that line: "I just thought I was a kid who said the Lord's Prayer every night when I went to bed with my parents." There was something so funny to me about it, about turning it on its head, especially when you're thinking about religion and how much violence gets used in the name of religion.

What I really like about that song is how direct the lyrics are. They're very… I wouldn't say *juvenile*, but you can kind of see them on paper, you know what I mean? You can just look at them and see exactly what they are. It's not trying to weave any other kind of story for you. There are a lot of songs that are trying to be like, "Oh, I went through this and *this is my fight song*." They're really triumphant. I thought that it would be more interesting to do a song that was about *not* being triumphant. I thought that, hopefully, it would resonate with a lot of people. This is not a unique experience. Unfortunately it's a very, very common experience.

When I thought about if I had something to say in that area, I thought it would be more interesting to create a song that allowed people to be angry and allowed people to be spiteful. Saying, "You don't have to fix that spite. You don't have to forgive everyone. You don't have to appease everyone. You don't have to pretend that everything is better every moment of your life." Sometimes you can just say, "Wow, that was fucked, and I'm kind of fucked up about it, and maybe that's just how it is for now. I'm just going to let that be."

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Thank you. My next question is for you, Nick. You've talked about learning that you don't need to suffer to make art. What was your journey to realizing that?

Nick Kivlen: Honestly, it was probably from being really depressed, and not being able to figure out what I'm supposed to be doing, what I'm trying to say—or romanticizing it. I'm always one foot in the door of falling into the trope of putting a special, otherworldly meaning onto artists that suffer. I just read this book that Julia had at her house about Nick Drake and his last album, and I'm like, "Oh, I'm getting sucked in again to this old trope of the tortured artist." I don't want to say it's true, but you think that someone who has gone through that kind of thing somehow has this wisdom or special otherworldly ability now.

It's not usually true that when you're in that space, you're creative or healthy or thriving in any sort of way… There's nothing romantic about feeling terrible about the way you are with people that are really close to you. I also was thinking about the song ["There's A Part I Can't Get Back"] in terms of faith, because I've always been jealous of people who say they feel the love of god or the love of Jesus, because I've never been able to feel that myself. I don't know what they're talking about when they say that they have that feeling. I'd rather live my life with that feeling of love and faith, but it's not something I've been able to find yet.

What is something that scares both of you about making art? How do you deal with that fear?

Nick: I would say nothing scares me about making art because making music—and creating in general—is my favorite thing to do. It's the time in my life when I'm away from everything that causes me anxiety. It's like playing in a world of make believe. I am never, ever, ever guided by any sort of fear when I'm making stuff.

Julia: I don't know if it is fearful, but for me it involves having a conversation with my subconscious and working continuously on strengthening my relationship with my subconscious. Sometimes your subconscious is a very ugly and scary partner to have in this journey. It is not ruled by logic. It's just totally ruled by something else. You can't control what's going to happen when you're interacting with it… I think the further I go on my life path and this journey, the more I can look at it like a partner and less like an animal I'm trying to catch.

What excites you about being an artist?

Nick: So much.

Julia: Besides making something where you really know that you've grown, like being able to pull off that chorus you really want, the best part for me is seeing the threads of how the work permeates in the world. When you get to meet kids who say that your band made them want to start a band, or when people say, "Your song was my wedding song." I think the world is a lot more non-physical than we give it credit for, especially working in a medium that is completely abstract. It's sound. You buy stuff sometimes to make it physical, but it's literally, like, a bird song in the wind. It's something that is hard to pin down. But to get to experience it having real world effects on other people, it starts to look like the roots of a tree. It starts to make you feel really connected to everything. I think that is one of my favorite parts.

Nick: I think that sums it up pretty well, honestly. That's such a good answer.

What do you think are the biggest challenges for you as artists right now? And how are you overcoming those challenges?

Nick: The most difficult thing for me creatively is the limitations of my recording setup, I would say. The main way that I found to work around it is focusing on lyrics and melody, and focusing on chord structure and emotion, and less on production.

Julia: I think I would say finding a balance. I've always kind of struggled with that: balancing the attention that I love to give to creativity and my career, and then how that balances into making sure that I have enough time for family. There's so much that we're so reliant for, on our community of friends, family, and creatives that we collaborate with. Sometimes I feel really guilty that I don't have enough to give back to them. That can be tough. I think especially as you get older, there's just more pressure in every direction—the people that need you and that you need.

The way that I deal with it now is that I've stopped operating with this idea that my life needs to look any certain way. I'm allowing it to unfold in a way where I can be the most useful at whatever time. I'm not trying to uphold anything because I think I should. I'm just trying to show up where I can… I've let go of trying to do something because I thought that was the thing I was supposed to be doing, and that's made it easier for me to actually show up for the people that I need to.

Sunflower Bean recommends:

The Who's "My Generation" on Smothers Brothers, 1967

Public Image Ltd's "Poptones"

Fleetwood Mac/Lindsey Buckingham's "Not That Funny" live, 1982

Alice In Chains' "Down in a Hole" on MTV Unplugged

Nirvana's "Drain You" live at The Paramount, Seattle, 1991

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Vocation
musicians

Lulu Syracuse