On leaning into specificity

The band MUNA discusses vulnerability after success, the importance of revision, and why weightlifting fits into their creative practice.

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As told to Arielle Gordon, 2011 words.

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When you write, are you ever worried about anchoring your lyrics in a specific place, like Los Angeles on "East Side Girls"?

Katie Gavin: I mean, when I write, I'm worried about everything. There's a certain point within the process where you're just worried, especially when you already have a platform and you know that people are going to be listening to it.

I think we were really inspired by LA with this whole record, but the thing that we landed on with the "East Side Girls," especially in the bridge, is that there is a whole historical canon of artistic gay communities on the East Side of a bunch of different cities. I remember being in Berlin and talking about this. Historically, factories have been on the East Side of many cities, so the rent around there is cheaper. The different places we list in the bridge are all places where I know that there has either now or at one point been an East Side culture.

At the same time, the more specific you get, the more people actually do attach to a song. I don't think you can overestimate people's ability to put themselves in your shoes. Listeners are so creative. They can fill in with their own experiences, even if you're giving them a clear feeling in a song.

Can you talk a bit about your decision to lean into political themes on *Dancing on the Wall*? Did you have any discussions in the band about that?

Naomi McPherson: Our art is going to be politicized whether we like it or not. So, we might as well try our best to make educated, cogent, informed, and interesting statements if we are to make them overtly in the songs.

"Big Stick" was a song that we've been working towards, a way to talk about these things in music. I often think songs that are super political run the risk of coming across as condescending, but I think there are plenty of examples of political songs that are super effective. We've just been waiting to figure out the way that we could be effective with our version of it without running the risk of people feeling like we think we're smarter or better than them.

It was never really a conversation of whether or not we should do it. It was just like how and what is the best way. There's a reference to climate change on "It Gets So Hot," and "Buzzkiller" has some moments as well. Acknowledging the contemporary political reality that we're living through is just an effort to write truthfully about our lived experience. To leave that part out would be dishonest. It's something we're very preoccupied with and think about a lot, as I'm sure most people do.

Josette Maskin: It's also been who we are since we started as a band. One of the first singles that we put out

was "Loudspeaker," a song shrouded in the guise of pop music, but with a really heavy message that we felt have always needed to be heard. "Big Stick" is maybe the most overt and also the most critical rather than personally motivated, but it's part of MUNA's DNA. There's never been a question about it.

Naomi, you produced this record, and you're a producer for other musicians. Do you approach songs differently from a production standpoint than you would as a musician?

NP: I think for me, production is almost like the instrument that I play in the band. I wouldn't describe myself as the strongest instrumentalist at any one particular instrument. I play keys and guitar when we perform live, and I sing background vocals. But production is where my brain as a musician functions most effectively, and it's kind of how I think about music. I fell into that role pretty naturally from the beginning of the band. I think production first, and then I figure out what the hell I'm going to be playing for the songs live later. I'm beat first, production first, and then I just figure it out on the backend as a band member. The songs get to take on their own new life in the live iteration of our project, which is cool too.

Did the success of "Silk Chiffon" create any pressure for this record?

KG: The reality of your life when you have success is it immediately becomes, "Okay, so how are you going to keep this up?" Or, "Are you going to do it again? Are you going to be able to repeat this thing that people liked?"

We had a very human response. I don't think we were reacting against "Silk Chiffon," but when you cross over to the mild extent that we did, you can feel like people don't totally understand you because they just know you as the "queer joy mini-skirt rollerblade" band.

We had a desire to take the time and the resources that that song allowed us to make the most cohesive body of work that we could, that we felt really represented who we have been the whole time as a band. If people respond to this record with open arms in the same way that they did with "Silk Chiffon," I will be so over the moon. But even if they don't, this is my favorite MUNA record that we've ever made. That was our approach to surviving this dilemma of what to do when your dreams come true.

JM: I think it's less about the song and more about the change in the political climate. We were seen in terms of queer joy, and then queer joy was subsumed by capitalism. We're in this era where rights are being stripped away. It's our reaction to that message as queer people who aren't just joyful. We're full of rage. We're people who are full of many emotions. This record hopefully reflects the political climate that we're in now. We're not going to fit into a beautiful Target ad.

Was it hard to be vulnerable as a songwriter after that success?

KG: I think that's always been an involuntary strength of mine as a songwriter, to be honest with you. If anything, I constantly have dysmorphia about the fact that we have gotten bigger or that the platform is bigger. When I'm writing, I forget how many people may hear something, which I guess is a good thing. It's worked in my favor.

Katie, about you released a solo record since MUNA's last album. Were there songs on there that you felt like you might save for MUNA? How did you know how to compartmentalize your solo creative process from the band?

KG: The solo record started before our third album came out. It was the result of having a hefty group of songs that Naomi and Jo didn't feel like were right for a MUNA record, but I still wanted to share with the world. "Aftertaste" was almost a MUNA song, but by that point in the process, I was like, "I need to have a single, so, sorry, but it's too late."

I started playing "She Gives Me Feelings" on that tour, and then I started a campaign to get "She Gives Me Feelings" on this most recent MUNA record. We tried it a bunch of different ways, and it just didn't work. It's kind of a constant negotiation, but MUNA is my primary project. I think the Katie Gavin solo world is a space for

me to be able to experiment with other things, and that's ultimately really good for me because it closes the loop on a lot of these things so that I can keep the songs moving.

How did the lyrics take shape for this record?

KG: This has definitely been our most collaborative record. "It Gets So Hot" was written in the room together from start to finish. "Girl's Girl" was written the same way with another songwriter, Justin Tranter. I tend to bring the band the rough draft of something or the first verse and chorus of something. Naomi had a note folder of a bunch of beats that they'd made. If I'm not making a skeleton of an Ableton session and writing over it, I'll go through and see how to wrap it around something from that.

With *Dancing On The Wall*, Naomi and I went into the studio and recorded the basic idea for the verse and chorus, and then ended up reworking a lot of the chorus because Josette had ideas about how to fine tune and make it the best version of what it is. We're really not anti-revision as a pop band. I've had to build up my tolerance for that, because obviously you're always going to idealize the experience of something coming out perfect on the first try. We've had so many experiences revising songs. Maybe they don't get better right away, but they usually end up better. It's this tried and true thing for us that you have to be willing to try stuff out.

What other creative practices outside of the band feed into MUNA?

NM: I'm hopeful that after this album, I'll be able to parlay my production into other producing jobs, but I would probably be pretty selective with what I took on.

My girlfriend's a standup comedian, and we share ideas about our different creative pursuits. I get a kick out of engaging with her and whatever she's working on because I'm a big comedy nerd. I really enjoy getting to participate to whatever removed extent I can in her world.

JM: When we're not doing MUNA stuff, I help other people write songs for their projects. That's always nice, because I do best helping other people reach what they're trying to say, or at least helping people parlay that. It's just helpful to see how other people work and think about songwriting in different ways. I think that helps influence the record in terms of song structure and form. I like collaborating. That's my favorite part about this project, and that's my favorite part about the other projects that I get to work on. That's really the creative part, other than bodybuilding.

NM and JM: Gym, tan, laundry.

Is there any overlap in the goals you set for yourself as a musician and the goals you're setting for yourself at the gym?

JM: My training has literally switched to preparing for the live show. As well as weightlifting, I'm doing jump roping to get cardiovascularly ready. I think we all have to get into a certain amount of shape to be able to perform the actual show because it's not like we're just standing around. We're really going for it.

NM: There is something about having a gym practice that feels almost contemplative for me. Lifting weights is a time for me to gather my thoughts and think about my creative practice, but not be doing it. I have a lot of ideas when I'm at the gym. It does get the juices flowing in other ways.

It really is just a good embodied practice. A lot of our work is totally out there and esoteric. We're talking about music. It's very groovy, and weightlifting is very practical. How you track your progress is just a numbers game. There's something soothing about that, too. I think it's gained in popularity all over the world because it's an arena in which you can feel yourself making progress in a world where often that is not made available to a lot of people. You can feel really stagnant and stuck in a life that maybe is very repetitive, and you can't feel yourself growing, but at the gym you can.

MUNA Recommends:

Doppelganger by Naomi Klein

24 Hour Party People

Visiting the LA River and LA Public Library

Name
MUNA

Vocation
musicians (MUNA)

Katie Gavin , Naomi McPherson, and Josette Maskin