

On going all in



Musicians Lira Mondale and Caufield Schnug (Sweeping Promises) on embracing ambiguity in songwriting, finding success on your own terms, and opting not to slow down.

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As told to Arielle Gordon, 3236 words.

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Can you talk a bit about how you landed in Lawrence and what that process was like? Financially? Creatively?

Caufield Schnug: It was chaos, we could have lost our career fields more or less in Boston. We left in 2020, moved in with my parents as so many people did, which is actually fairly lovely. But we were in my childhood bedroom for a year. We were dealing with a record advance, which is more money than we've ever had in savings, but also in our scheme of things, not very much money to maneuver. But we could afford a house in Kansas. So we were looking all over the country. We were going to put a down payment on a church in Ohio that was selling for \$80,000 in a very small town.

Lira Mondale: A small town outside of Youngstown, which is itself very small. We were making these maneuvers in the summer of 2021, right before we were going on tour. We were trying to figure out how to bring Sweeping Promises to a live show after only having played one show before the pandemic. And then on top of that, just maneuvering our newfound relationship with Sub Pop and reconciling that with still wanting to be on Feel It, which as you can tell, has been fine. The album's coming out on both labels, and everyone's been lovely to work with, but there was still just so much to tread through in addition to still being in the middle of the pandemic. Your parents advised us to at least go look at the church, because when you live in a coastal city, you're very used to sight-unseen housing. We came, we saw, we did not conquer that castle.

Caufield: Lawrence was quite unspecific, but we love being here incidentally. It's been wonderful.

Lira: Honestly, it's the studio that sold the house. We looked at 10 houses the day before in Kansas City, and then this '50s style ranch house just popped up on Zillow. We drive up to this residential cul-de-sac near the university, walk in, and see this cathedral-esque space that is so organically beautiful. It has all this light and has the spirit of art in it, because the previous owners were artists as well. So it was a very intentionally crafted space, and we felt that. And I think that that's what drew us magnetically. As soon as we saw it and we heard the reverberance of the room and saw the high-pitched ceilings, we just looked at each other and we then looked at Caufield's aunt, who was our real estate agent, and we said, let's put in an offer right now, immediately. Let's lock this up.

How do different recording environments impact your creative process as you're building out new songs? Do you write songs knowing that they're going to be recorded in a particular space?

Caufield: I like recording in super imprecise spaces. I don't like the ideology or mindset of control that a lot of recordings go after now. We think of the atmosphere as part of the instrumentation and also part of the feeling that you try to capture in recording. We still alter the space. We'll change it around and add dampening depending on the song. I really think the atmosphere or the site specificity as part of the recording.

Lira: Every single time we go in to record here, the setup is a little bit different. There'll be one day where Caulfield wants to baffle his amp in one way and might get a particular way, and then the very next day he'll change it. Even if just a small measure, it's still incredibly different. It's a very malleable space that we've got, which is super beneficial, but then also presents its own challenges in terms of continuity. The beauty of it is that we can just leave things set up and then walk into a ready to work situation at will, which is huge compared to sharing a space with five or six other bands in a very highly populated urban center.

Your previous record was recorded on this single mic technique, which you're not using this time around. What techniques did you use in place of a single mic?

Caulfield: The recordings are fake-y mono. We cut a lot of corners. There are stereo synths every now and then on some of the songs. Some of them are true mono, if I remember right. We were trying to be militant about it, but it was hard to pull off in this space. We broke our promise. There is multi-micing, but there aren't a lot of multi mics.

Lira: I think it's mostly just where the drums are concerned, and it makes sense because it's condensed, but there's still very much the same amount of tail and echo. You have more mics now. It didn't sound as good with just one mic. We tried it on the drums.

Caulfield: What do you call that mathematical principle?

Lira: Occam's razor?

Caulfield: Yeah, that's right. Our margin is getting wider and wider. We're adding more surfaces. It's a slightly more complexified recording, but we still want to be cave people. We're talking a very minimal monophonic sort of setup. We still try to move as fast as sin.

Was there more pressure on *Good Living Is Coming For You* now that you are signed to Sub Pop and that there was going to be maybe more of a promotion around it?

Caulfield: I wouldn't say it had anything to do with the label. It was us deciding to do music with our lives and being beholden to music in a different way.

Lira: Took the words right out of my mouth.

Caulfield: For instance, our last album we released in the spirit of literally, "No one's going to listen to this one." It was purely for friends. And I think the mindset couldn't be more different this time around where we feel as if we have to have a career. So that'd be the big change and that's not coming from Sub Pop.

Lira: We were allowed all of a sudden the opportunity to even think about this as a career, as opposed to *Hunger for a Way Out*, which was, as Caulfield said, testing the waters only for ourselves, because we were ready to do something else immediately after releasing that. We are prone to jumping genre-ship at least yearly, if not semi-annually.

Interviewer: How did you shake off that pressure and stay loose and creative, knowing that you were making it with the intent of people listening to it instead of just for yourselves.

Caulfield: Loose and creative? No, no, no. You lean into the tribulation. We're very stressed out people. Are you loose?

Lira: I'm not loose. I'm wound very tight. We kept setting these deadlines for ourselves, and we kept exceeding them, passing them. We finally just said, this is going to happen when it happens, and we can't put a deadline on creativity. There were a lot of songs that went through multiple iterations. We started to figure out what making music as a career means. I was very much attached to the first iteration of a song as that being the ideal.

Caufield's like, "Let's tease it out. Let's expand it. We're in a new space. It doesn't mean that you have to be so religious about the first take." When we were in [previous studio] Garden Street, we were working just a little bit faster. We had to have everything done immediately because we were sneaking in under the cover of darkness to record. Now things are a little more relaxed; if an idea's not working, you can come back to it in a couple of hours or another day and try it again, because this is your space and your home. I think that's something that we're still sort of working on, being more flexible.

Caufield: Lira's very disciplined. We're control freaks.

Lira: After 14 years of working together, we are both very much control freaks, but now all of a sudden, both our different kinds of control freakiness are coming to—

Caufield: An awful resolution. We're like control freaks who believe in automatic writing or something that's like this weird mismatch.

Lira: We're pretty laid back people. But then something happens when you start creating, and then you either view it as an extension of yourself, or you're trying to have this remove from your idea or a global idea, even though it's coming from you. But then you're also working with a partner and a collaborator, and so you're just constantly doing this dance of *how does this reflect who I am, but not become overly personal? How does it stay mysterious?* You're trying to pull these threads in the universe that you want to pull, but not entangling you in the process or the other person.

Lira, when we last spoke in 2021, you were making chocolate bean-to-bar, I believe. Are you still making chocolate? And if so, do you find that your creativity in culinary arts is informed by your creativity as a musician and vice versa?

Lira: I have not bought beans, I don't think, since the last time we talked. I was still working on the last batch that I had made, and so I need to get more because I need to roast more. I've had all these ideas—I want to play around with making different kinds of white chocolate with different infusions, and basically, I'm still very much in love with that world and interested in it, but I've put it off to the side.

Being in a place that has a front and a backyard, for instance, all of a sudden I am privy to the daily lives of a bunch of little creatures. I've been observing the birds and the rabbits and the lizards around here. I want to get back into reading more and watching more film. All of this is just contingent on having free time for music, and right now, we're in the process of working on a couple of albums and then Caufield's got a fully packed schedule as well. The short answer is I'm still very much into baking and pastry, and I've been making a lot of cakes for people. I've gotten back into making celebration cakes for parties, and it's been really lovely to kind of dip my toe back into it. It's something that kind of ebbs and flows, my desire to make pastry and chocolate and things like that. But when I do it, I still find joy in it.

What do you do to relax?

Lira: We watch *The Sopranos*. It's very relaxing show. Puts me in my Zen mode.

Caufield: We're cinephilic.

Lira: Our library has a really, really great collection. So in addition to the Criterion Channel, which we subscribe to, we also just go to the library and pick out DVDs that suit our fancy.

Caufield, I wanted to ask about your mixing and mastering work as Melody Men Mastering. When you're mastering records for other artists, how do you balance keeping the artist's intent with your own opinions on the creative process?

Caufield Schnug: Oh, I'll speak up. It depends on the projects, because if a band is coming with really specific

sonic ideas, you want to honor that, and I respect a determined vision, and I want to be a part of a determined vision. But if a band is not so sure, perhaps they're coming to me because they know I'm a little bit opinionated.

How do you view remastering a record like *The Toms*, versus a brand new record you're mastering. Do you take a different approach?

Caufield: I just started doing some records that were in other time periods. The Toms was recorded 40 years ago. I've been working with a few other lost punk 7"s. I think a lot of that music falls into a disastrous archive, and needs repair.

The first thing you have to think about is, "What was this music sounding like?" You don't want to preserve a faulty record that has been scratched and poorly digitized or whatever. Or it's a third generation YouTube rip because the digital origin's been lost or something. With The Toms, I did think about playing up the AM side and extremifying the niche aspects of the recording. I think what's so great is the eccentricity of this dude [The Toms' Tommy Marolda] who locked himself in a private space for so long doing deep recording. I think I try to intensify the oblique aspects of that media envelope that was his time period in his situation.

Lira: I feel like you sometimes extract things that you like from whatever project you're working on, and then apply them to our method as well.

Caufield: Yeah. That's one of the reasons why I do so much work on the outside. I feel like I'm a spy and I take ideas from others for our own.

You've recorded together in many bands across 14 years. How do you stay in the *Sweeping Promises* sound and mindset when you're creative and make sure that you're not accidentally writing music that would be better suited for another project?

Caufield: The short answer is that you make another project, which we did. And no one knows about it yet. We wrote another album for another project. That's how you do it. You have to make the outside zone in order to dictate the inside zone. We started making music because we felt like there had to be this other net that caught the other impulses that were somehow outside of *Sweeping Promises*.

Lira: The thing that I love about our music and the beauty of it is that, excuse me, it is very personal to us. I feel like only we could have had these ideas at that moment, but we try to leave things very open-ended and approachable. But also, sometimes I won't have a realization of something until months after I've written it that you can apply this sort of filter or way of translating it.

Something that was tripping me up is that everything has to be set in stone as far as the intention of a song, what it's about, who's speaking, who is being addressed in that moment. I'm letting that go. It's a lifelong lesson, especially in this hyper narrative tradition of songwriting, both in punk and pop, where what you're singing about has to be clear in the moment. There are some elements of ambiguity that have been lost. I think that it's possible to be precise and ambiguous at the same time.

You have a line on your new record, "bury yourself in your work." Is creating music labor for you, and do you bury yourself in it?

Caufield: Yes.

Lira: Yes. You are quite literally buried right now.

Caufield: Yeah, always. That's life. I don't know. I think we're really lucky to have this type of labor, but music labor is labor. Sure.

Lira: It is. There's the very basic physical element of you moving amps and heavy gear around. Thinking about music as a labor of love... It really truly is, especially now that we find ourselves in a small but robust DIY community in town, seeing other people's beautiful labor come to fruition in the terms of putting on shows and connecting with one another. We inherited some really wonderful neighbors here who have opened their own studio to us to borrow gear, and it's really been incredible to have that kind of connection and community.

Caufield: I think there are some associations with our band and labor consciousness, and obviously we feel sympathy towards this. We're ex-workaholics. We can't shake it. I don't know what it is. It's an impulse for us to go all in.

Sweeping Promises Recommend:

Caufield:

Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class: Catherine Liu (University of Minnesota Press, 2021)

A solid short book, from a thoroughgoing Marxist perspective, about the professionalization of everything. Liu's polemic here takes aim at the slow burn of the PMC, decades in the making, which has deployed a performative politics of virtue signals and institutional "good taste." This superficial, moralizing politics ends up obstructing genuine calls for social redistribution while furthering individualistic notions of meritocracy and philanthropy entirely compatible with late capitalism. And the book does well to get into the managerial headspace of wannabe elites, diagnosing their need to feel and act with superiority despite the downward mobility characterizing the world around them.

***The Seashell and the Clergyman* (Germaine Dulac - 1928)**

A divine piece of early feminist surrealism. A terrifying associative inner logic commands this phantasmagoric film, impossible to categorize or even describe in concrete terms. Dulac's camera treats human figures as environmental and mental abstractions, constantly floating, bobbing, dissolving into shadowy dreamlands. I enjoy that this film, for all its diaphanous and untouchable qualities, feels like it could be made by anyone with a camera and a trick mirror. Long live the radical lo-fi aesthetics of the 1920s! Also a plus: ugly and wicked feelings pervade this film - jealousy, incompetence, vertigo, etc. I enjoy live-mixing punk records to this film on mute.

Lira:

***On-Gaku: Our Sound* (dir. Kenji Iwaisawa, 2019)**

I can't stop gushing over this film! A clever and exuberant animated tale of three high school bad boys who, out of equal parts boredom and curiosity, start a band (whose inaugural composition kinda sounds like the first 10 seconds of Slint's "Nosferatu Man" on endless loop and sped up 10x...sick!). The animation style is a gorgeous combination of hand-drawn characters and painted backgrounds, and Shintaro Sakamoto as the voice of the outrageously deadpan Kenji is pure perfection. There's also a climactic showdown involving some virtuosic recorder-playing that is not to be missed!

The Early Years by Operating Theatre

A dazzling collection of minimal wave/synth pop/industrial-tinged new wave by Irish electro-acoustic composer Roger Doyle. Doyle co-founded Operating Theatre—a traveling theater company—in the early 80s with Irish actress and vocalist Olwen Fouéré, and the music collected on *Early Years* served to accompany their various staged productions. This is an immersive and far-reaching compilation, but the clear standout is the transcendent, club-ready "Spring is Coming With a Strawberry in the Mouth": an ecstatic mutant dance track with jittery breakbeats and Elena Lopez's impassioned, operatic vocals (this track and a handful of others, intriguingly, produced by none other than Bono).

Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA (especially in October)

I worked at a bakery near this cemetery for a few years, and after my shift ended, I'd often spend an hour or more walking the extensive grounds as a way to decompress. The panoramic view of Boston at the top of Washington Tower, the sight of autumn sunlight igniting fiery yellow Norway maples and ripe, jewel-like graveyard apples—these images are forever etched in my memory. I hope I get the chance to visit this special place again.

Name

Lira Mondal and Caufield Schnug (Sweeping Promises)

Vocation

musicians

□

Shawn Brackbill