

Patty Schemel on how to tell your life story



November 6, 2017 - Patty Schemel is an American drummer, songwriter, and comedian best known for her work with the band Hole. She is on the board of the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls in California, a non-profit organization that teaches girls all over the world that it's okay to be loud. She continues to perform, teach, and tour, currently with the band Upset, and lives in Los Angeles with her wife and daughter. Here she discusses the process of writing her memoir, *Hit So Hard*, and the ways that making music has been a source of healing in her life.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1995 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Anxiety](#), [Adversity](#), [Identity](#).

You've had a documentary made about your life, and were also asked to write a book about it.

The documentary came about because I had a bunch of hi-eight videotapes—tons of stuff from the Hole, Nirvana heyday, stuff from my private life—and a friend said, “You have to digitize that, because it’s going to dissolve.” It had already started to dissolve. At the time my wife worked in film and TV, and she set up a dubbing deck. While we were doing that, one of our friends, David, came over, he’s a director, and he saw some of the footage. Christine was telling him about it and they were like, “You should do something with this.” So that’s how the film started. It was cool because I’m a fan of music docs and I love seeing the archival footage. I had so much of it from that time, so it was nice to be able to use it.

It’s surprising how much of it managed to survive, considering how out of control your life would later become. As I was reading *Hit So Hard*, I was amazed you were able to save anything. At a certain point, you’d lost everything.

Yeah, everything was gone. I sold things, lost things, had things stolen. It’s amazing to think about why some things remained and other things didn’t. As I was going around to different film festivals and answering questions about the film, I noticed people were asking a lot more about certain things. I got interested in telling stories, so I started doing things like Asscat at the Upright Citizen’s Brigade, things like that. I really started to enjoy it. I realized that I have this story that I could share. I can share my music, but it felt good to share the rest of my experience as well. Also, it’s funny the kind of stuff that comes out. The girls I play with in my band will ask me questions all the time and suddenly I hear myself saying things like, “Well, you know, Marilyn Manson really liked comic books. He wasn’t really like a dark vampire weirdo,” or whatever.

I discovered that I liked telling these stories. I was approached by a publisher who said, “I saw the doc. Would you be interested in doing a book?” And I was like, “I’m not a writer.” I eventually warmed up to the idea, but it was a complicated process. I worked with someone who could help me along. The process began with me and her talking on the phone and her asking me questions, like an interview. She would turn these talks into text, but when she’d send me the pages it somehow felt like my voice wasn’t in there yet, so I started working on my own. I would write things and then she would help me fix it. It was good to have someone help me arrange my thoughts, but sometimes it’s also ok to not know what you’re doing. My attitude was like, “Okay, just do it!”

The process of putting the book together was very long, around three and a half years. I’d work on it when I was on the road touring with my band, and I’d work on it at home. I’d take little trips out of town and try to just focus on doing it. The craziness of it was literally going back in time and describing what was happening with me back then. Going back to a memory and describing the room, and describing how I was feeling and who was there. It was hard. It was like reliving all of those things. The tough stuff was really pretty horrific to try and describe. I felt like I needed going to double up on the therapy, because I would emerge from that time machine of writing and suddenly be back into the world and go, “Whoa.” I’d be writing about the depths of my drug addiction and then have to stop and go pick my daughter from school, you know?

What helped you move through that process?

I started to read a lot about memoir, and Mary Karr has a great book, *The Art of Memoir*, which talks about how your memory of something may not be accurate. You know, your memory of something and the way someone else remembers it might be very different. You both know that it happened, but their lens is very different. It’s also surprising just how much you can actually start to remember when you get into this certain mindset. I would really just go back and start telling the story in my head and then things would just unfold. So, it was really a crazy process. Writing is like this incredible muscle that you have to learn to use and control and I still very much feel like a beginner.

Having done this creatively driven examination of your life—both as a film and as a memoir—what were some of the biggest surprises? What did you learn about yourself?

When writing about your life you have to really examine the decisions you made and why you made them. It’s hard, but it also makes you realize what a different person you are now as opposed to back then. It’s interesting to see, “Well, back in those days I would have done *this*, but I don’t do that anymore.” It’s important for me to see the difference, to understand that I’ve changed. Also, sometimes I sort through tough things with jokes and humor, and I did some of that in the documentary. In the book it’s a lot more intense, not nearly as many jokes. (laughs)

It’s hard to write about rock and roll and drugs without inadvertently mythologizing or glorifying it, but your book is the very definition of a cautionary tale.

Because that’s the way it was. It was awful. I feel like it’s so important to talk about my experience. I was a drug addict and an alcoholic since before I was in Hole, it wasn’t because I was in a rock band. It’s just that being in a rock band makes it easier to be one. So many people I knew in that world who were addicts didn’t make it. At the end of the book I talk about Chris Cornell, which is just so tragic. Sometimes people make it through and then decide they still don’t want to be here. It’s such a struggle. Everybody tries to fill that empty thing in them, you know? Like, everybody would say to me, “How could Kurt Cobain kill himself? He had everything!” But when you think that’s what’s going to make you okay—and it doesn’t—it’s devastating.

Your book not only affirms you as a musician, it also speaks to the healing power of a creative life.

The love of playing music is never gone, but one of my big realizations was that when I was fired from my band, and that was my whole life, I thought that’s all there was to me. Then discovering after so many attempts at getting clean and sober—and then eventually getting clean and sober—that it wasn’t true. I had the feeling, “It’s okay to put that away for now.” I had to stop for a while because my ego was wrapped up in it. I had to put it all away and then to start to experience other things. This is going to sound so corny, but I really like knitting and things like that. You start to figure out that there’s so much more to you than you ever thought and you just have to allow it to happen, you know? After doing that, music could come back into my life in a healthy way.

When you’ve been a part of a band with a storied, infamous history, does that color your view of playing music later on? The feeling that, no matter what you might do later, you’ll always be competing with your own history?

I think about that, but I also think that for me it’s a physical thing. When I discovered drums, when I was young, it was something that made me feel better. I just have to do it, you know? There’s that release in it, and that’s how I create. It’s just such a part of me. I also feel like because I’m a woman and I play drums, it’s important for me to be visible and to play and to be doing the thing I was meant to do. In my current band, it’s much like the old days. We tour in a van, and we go into the all ages venue where you don’t want to use the bathroom. We set up and play a show, and afterwards it’s nice to hear from a girl that, “You made me play drums.” That’s important. That feels good,

especially right now.

What is your creative practice these days? For a lot of my friends who are drummers it's not just how they make music, it's almost like going to the gym or something. It's like, "I need to get up and play for an hour and feel my body."

Those are the things that come up in my head. Like, "Hey. You're old now. You know, *older* anyway, but you still have time. Why don't you really get back into your craft?" One of the reasons I got excited about the drums again over the past few years is because I'm now sharing that with my daughter. Also, my mom died two years ago, and when I was going through that grieving process I was just at a loss and I needed *something*. Not knowing what else to do, I went out to the garage and took out the very first drum kit that I ever had. You know, it's old and dusty and worn out, so I set it up and started to refinish it. I put new hardware on it, fixed it all up, and that was what I needed. Drums are safe and comforting. I know everything about them. To work on that drum set felt like home. It felt comfortable and good. It reminds you, literally, of what music gives to you.

It's cool to hear someone really talk about drumming and what drummers do. Your book does that.

It's the rant of the drummer to talk about how we don't get publishing. But that's the deal. That's what happens. If you're in a band and there's four of you in the room and you write a song, you don't have to pitch to the drummer, you don't need to give them publishing. So, maybe that's why I still tour and have to diversify my income, whereas my other members in my band maybe don't not have to. I'm not bitter about that part, but we're important. I wanted to talk about that.

I'll often go and practice and find myself getting really inspired again by the possibilities, whether it's playing along with my drum machine, putting loops on and then playing with that, or coming up with new ideas, new drum parts. When I was younger, seeing other drummers play was the inspiring thing. I remember watching Danny Peters play in Mudhoney and thinking, "I want to do that, exactly the drum part he's doing now" and then I'd go and practice that by myself. When I play shows with my band, or when I see other drummers play, I get inspired. In some ways that has never changed. I just want to be a better drummer. That's all I care about, being a better drummer.

Patty Schemel recommends:

5 things we need more of

1. Women's voices in music, film and art.
2. Planned Parenthood
3. Maxine Waters
4. My Bloody Valentine music
5. Gun control

Name

Patty Schemel

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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Photo by Darcy Hemley