

March 1, 2017 - Pharmakon is the solo industrial noise project of New York musician Margaret Chardiet. Her fourth album, *Contact*, is out in March 2017.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1846 words.

Tags: Music, Independence, Anxiety, Success, Income.



Pharmakon on not selling yourself

Now that you have a higher profile outside of the underground noise scene, you're often presented in situations where you're the most extreme artist on a bill. Have you had to deal with hecklers? People who don't get it, and they're angry, or upset in some way?

I don't really have people who get angry at me, which is surprising, because in the last year and a half or so my sets have become really physical and really physically engaging with the audience. It's important for me to get my intention across that it's not just a macho posturing thing, because that could upset people. That's a fine line to walk.

I think it helps that I'm five feet tall, and not very physically intimidating. Kind of like a woman coming from this place of someone who traditionally you wouldn't feel threatened by. I like playing with that and using that to my advantage to do things that are questionable—like, if I was a six foot tall white guy, would I would get away with it?

I haven't gotten a lot of anger. I've gotten a lot of people where it snapped something off in their head that they needed to talk about. I think that's the most common thing, as far as people who weren't expecting it—they need to talk to me after I play.

Typically it is someone who says, "This fucked me up, basically, and I need to talk to you about what it made me think of, and discuss if this was your intention and..." I get a lot of people who are affected in a very serious way, and they want to talk to me about it. Which is ultimately positive. Which is ultimately the whole point.

I get people who are made really uncomfortable by it, and instead of talking to me about what it made them feel they'll just push it down and heckle and things like that. I don't know how to describe it, but it's basically like the verbal equivalent of nervous laughter. When you're nervous and you don't know what to do, and you feel uncomfortable, so you lash out by laughing, even though that's a very inappropriate response.

One time when I was in South America I had someone grab my butt while I was playing. That was the worst thing that ever happened. He got dealt with. I stopped and just screamed at him, and was like, "Who did that?" And made it very clear that it wasn't okay, and then kept going. It made the rest of the set pretty intense.

Also, it's blisteringly loud, so if people are saying something to me I probably can't hear it anyhow. So maybe I get heckled more than I realize.

But I guess it's not that common; people now have the internet to heckle. They have the comments on BrooklynVegan, or Facebook, or whatever.

Has it been hard to kind of maintain your original ethics and intent as your profile has grown?

It's half and half. I told my label how I felt very early in the beginning about things like having social media pages and promoting myself through social media. I said that that wasn't my bag, so to speak. They've been super respectful of that, and anyone who's trying to book a show or whatever, their contact is super easy to find and so therefore my email, by proxy, is easy to find. I haven't had a lot of trouble with people getting in contact with me regardless of not having that.

The only issue that I have had is that there are two fake Pharmakon pages. There's even a fake Margaret Chardiet page, which is upsetting to me because I feel like that should be my right if I want to do that, but at the same time they're fan pages, and so I'm imagining it's probably a 16 year old girl or boy who's just into it and also really into Facebook and doesn't understand why I don't have one, so they made one. I'm sure the intention is good, but the problem is that I get people who are like, "I sent you this message and you never got back to me, I was really bummed out!" That's why that upsets me.

For instance, there's this artist that I really admire and wanted to play shows with, who also lives in New York. I never really went up to her to talk to her at shows or anything because I didn't know her personally, but I finally got the balls up to be like, "Hey, we should play a show together sometime and

hang out.” And she was like, “Oh, yeah, I tried to contact you on Facebook a year ago and you never got back to me.” And I was like, “That’s because that wasn’t me.”

It’s hard because even if you make certain choices, whether they be aesthetic or moral or ethical, other people can stomp on that a little bit. People can misinterpret your lyrics and twist them to be about something else. People can like you for the wrong reasons or hate you for the wrong reasons. People can use your name when you’re not around.

Are there shows that you don’t want to do? Like a sponsored show or a show that’s sponsored by a company that maybe you disagree with, or a lineup that you don’t think makes sense?

I’m having this conversation a lot with my friends right now, because I’m careful about shows that I play and don’t play. I’ll usually try something once, and if I hate it I’m not going to do it again. The reason I wanted to put out a record on Sacred Bones, the reason that I agreed to do interviews and things like that, and exist concurrently outside of the underground, was because I wanted to reach people who were only getting this one side of the story from this indie media complex. Younger kids, people that would appreciate it and whose minds would be opened and it would turn them on to all sorts of other stuff. I wanted to do that.

In order to do that, you have to play shows that you wouldn’t have played otherwise because they’re not with all your friends, and you don’t know anyone in the crowd, and you don’t know the other people who are playing, and there’s a booking agent involved and all that kind of stuff. For the most part, that stuff can be really useful and positive. As long as you stand your ground and you say, “I don’t feel comfortable with that,” when things come along you don’t want to do, you just say no to them. If things stop coming in, then so be it. I’m not going to change my ethics or who I am or the kind of artist I want to be just for money.

It’s also hard not to get this guilt complex to not take a show just because it’s high paying. Sometimes I get offered shows and I’m like, “Should I do this? Should I do this?” And my friends are like, “Why the hell wouldn’t you do that? Do it.” You know? It’s strange. Sometimes it feels weird getting paid to play music, to be honest.

The way you do that positively is you just make sure that that money is not coming from a place where you make a compromise for your art. As long as you don’t make that compromise and you have that opportunity, the truth is most people would take that. To make a living off of your art is rare. Right now, I’m totally flat broke because I’m not touring.

But when I am touring, I’m paying my rent off that. When you’re a musician, there’s this weird thing inside you that makes you feel like it’s dirty if you get paid for your work. I don’t think it’s the same for artists or dancers because there’s a well-established patronage system for them.

But you have to make a living. You have to put a roof over your head, and eat. If you want to dedicate all of your time to your art and do that, and someone is willing to give you money to do that, and you don’t have to do anything outside of your moral ethical code or whatever, you should do it.

I’ll give you a perfect example. I don’t know if I’d get in a legal thing for mentioning their names, so maybe you’ll have to cross out the company name? I don’t know how that stuff works legally. Anyway, I was offered 90,000 dollars to have a song that I had already made used for less than 30 seconds in a commercial for a razor. I wouldn’t have to do anything. It was a song I’d already written, it was on my first record. I turned it down, right away. I said, “I can’t do this.” I couldn’t live with myself, and the reason is... It’s funny, because the thing that got me wasn’t even just, “I’m going to be maybe making money for this corporation,” somehow by proxy, by having my music in the commercial that’s advertising for their product, which certainly is a concern. It was the fact that the music I poured my fucking heart and soul into, that meant a lot to me, that was really particularly conceptual to this one idea, was probably was going to be used in a jokey, funny way. You can hear some industrial rhythm as a blade enters towards a bunch of hairs and mows them down, right?

That’s clearly what’s going to be happening in that commercial. That would be absolutely humiliating. I’m a cheapskate, I don’t care that I could live three years off of that. It’s not worth it to me, because in three years that money is going to be gone and my pride is still going to be hurt. My artistic center is going to be all out of focus and off centered.

It sucks being like, “Somebody wanted to give me almost 90,000 dollars, too bad I can’t do it.” Yeah, I’m broke right now, but you make those decisions because money comes and goes. That stuff never lasts. People care about you or don’t. None of that shit matters. The truth is I’ve had this project for five or six years, before anybody cared, and I’m going to have it for 30 to 40 years after no one cares. It’s tied to who I am, and I’m not going to sell myself.

Margaret Chardiet recommends:

Labyrinths by Jorge Luis Borges

Music And Trance (A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession) by Gilbert Rouget

thoughtmaybe.com

Cafe Bustelo

Name

Margaret Chardiet

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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