

Phil Elverum on creating art from grief



March 15, 2017 - Phil Elverum is the Anacortes, Washington-based songwriter, producer, and artist behind the musical projects, the Microphones and Mount Eerie. The most recent Mount Eerie album, *A Crow Looked At Me*, is a song cycle about the death of Elverum's wife, the artist and musician Geneviève Castrée, who was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer four months after she and Elverum's daughter was born.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2158 words.

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

Something striking about the album is the level of detail—talking about the exact contents of what you're throwing out from the trash can, keeping the windows open until it gets too cold for the baby.

Two years ago, so before even starting to think about this album, I wrote guidelines in a notebook for new music that I wanted to make in the future. They were like rules. I remember sitting in a hospital waiting room thinking about what could music possibly even be. I referred to them a lot while making this. It was after I had finished *Sauna* and I thought, "Well that album's kind of ungainly, what can I do now?"

Oh yeah, here: "Songs in the future. No reverb. Close and direct. Dense with easy words. Don't rely on hanging emotions or drawn-out notes. Engage the mind's chewing teeth. Say everything as it is. No metaphors. Resist big-picture reflections." I think it was because I was reading Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* books at the time. They have that tone. Nothing happens in those books really. They're not about anything. They're just this puzzle but they're hyper-specific and somehow at the end of reading them, I feel like something profound just happened but I don't know what, so I think that was the idea.

There's a line about how you don't want to learn anything from the death of your wife. But, while making the record, did you end up learning anything?

I'm sure. That line is more just hating it all so much that I felt like... it's kind of adolescent. To be like, "I don't want to learn this lesson!" Even though I know there's a lesson happening to me. I just didn't want to even participate. I don't know exactly what it is that I have learned. I think it's an ongoing evolution all the time. This has been a big shift. I think maybe the big one is, when I listen to my older songs, there are all these ambiguous metaphors. That's how it all seems to me. It's me trying to make sense of some concept that I thought of and I'm like, "I'm going to explain this concept." It's just numbing. Talking about taking out the garbage is somehow so much more powerful to me now.

On the opening song, "Real Death," you address the difficulty of turning the death of a loved one into art or into poetry.

I wanted to address the contradiction that's in the whole album. Not contradiction exactly, but there's something crass about it... There's a distinction between real death and the conceptual death that I've written about for the whole rest of my 20 years, without knowing what it actually felt like.

With Geneviève's sickness I was just thinking about mortality and loss everyday, all day. That felt like it was exempt from words or music. There was something crude about putting it to music. I guess I'm conflicted about it still, even though I'm releasing the album and doing a PR campaign for it, which is so gross and weird from a lot of perspectives.

And I do still feel like I'm a little bit in the trauma of Geneviève dying, however many months ago. There's this shift in perspective that feels mostly bad, but also, there is a positivity to it. It's difficult to explain. It's like a broader awareness or something. It's also easier to keep my priorities straight. Being a single parent, I just have to do so many things every day. I make so few choices of my own. I think that that's informative in a good way.

That shifts the whole idea of touring in general, I would imagine.

I'm trying to figure that puzzle out right now. Touring with a child.

So, you're going to go on a tour where you'll play these songs over and over again?

I'm planning to do that. I don't know how it's going to go. There's the natural progression of writing a song, where with every day that passes, I identify with it less. It's always been that way, but with these songs, it feels so weird and bad to become numb to them. To be able to sing the song without being totally engaged with the words. With this in particular, it seems extra perverse or wrong to do that.

I'm anticipating very weird feelings in every room that I sing in, where people are maybe being subjected to these images or feelings for the first time. I, meanwhile, am more numb to it or more further advanced in the desensitization process.

I don't think it's my personality to become a public helper or a symbol for grief or sadness for other people. It's a weird balance I guess I'm trying to strike between being public about it and protecting my own story.

What did it feel like to play them in front of people that first time?

I was pretty disengaged. I was just trying to get through it, honestly. I was pretty nervous and I had a lot of pressure building up to it. Also, I was really sick and so I was concentrating on swallowing enough spit, just taking care of my throat. When I sing these songs to myself or when I listen to them, it feels good. It feels like hanging out with Geneviève in a way. Even though it's sad stuff, it still feels like being present with her and with the memories of her. That feels really good actually.

On the album there's the reminder of time now and then: It's been a month, it's October, it's a year later. It strikes you, listening to it, that these songs are being written at different times, as you grieve. It's a diary.

Yeah, it's a diary. They're like diary entries that are definitely anchored in the calendar, and also geographically. It's a little detail but on the labels on the LP, underneath each song in fine print, I put the date and the place that probably it was written or like beginning to be written or that I associate with it being written. Whether or not it was literally written in that moment, each song is anchored to a very specific moment.

You recorded it in the room where Geneviève died, and also used a lot her instruments. Was this another way of sort of commuting with her?

Totally. I didn't attach too much heavy symbolism to like playing her guitar or whatever but it was the guitar that was right there and it felt good to be using her stuff.

Did you learn anything from doing the record quickly? Did it teach you anything you may use later?

I do think that. Although, I don't want to make the same type of record ever twice in a row. I do want to keep experimenting, but it was a realization that I didn't record it in my studio. I have this awesome studio here in town and I didn't do that. I just set up a computer and one microphone in a room in my house and I like how it sounds. It made me realize that I don't need all this huge stuff. They're just different kinds of albums.

I don't know what albums I might make in the future, but that way of writing felt really good. I almost changed my band name for this album because it doesn't feel like a Mount Eerie

album at all. But last time I changed my band name, it was such a pain in the ass to have to talk about it all the time, so I gave up on the idea.

Did you find it difficult to finish it? In a sense that once the album was done, this particular process of finding comfort through writing these songs was maybe coming to an end as well?

Not really, because I know I can write more and I probably should write more if I need to. It doesn't feel like it's capped off. I feel like I'm going to be grieving and mourning forever. That's something I've read about grief that seems to make sense to me, that it's not like a thing you get over. It's just this is what life is like now. So I don't place any big symbolism on the album being capped off.

Did writing the album help with your grief?

It was fully therapeutic.

I know from my own personal experience, when my mother died of pancreatic cancer shortly before my son was born, there's a point where you know death is inevitable. You've had a chance to mentally prepare in some way, but when death happens and it's confirmed, it's still a shock.

For us, I mean for me, subconsciously that was sort of, I tortured myself about it a little when she was sick. Her decline seemed clear and inevitable to me but she never got to an accepting point with it, so I had to keep those types of thoughts private. For me, I couldn't turn off the part of my brain that wants to strategize and prepare and just like fuss around and get things ready.. Like, I couldn't stop thinking about, "Okay, well, what songs should we play at her memorial? Should I get the things printed?" She's in the other room. It's a perverse thing that happens in my mind, but the therapist said it's fine, so I'm off the hook.

You've always been a private person. Once Genevieve's sickness became public with the GoFundMe page, was it easier to kind of speak publicly about the sickness and publicly in these songs about her death?

That was the beginning of an opening up. I was ready a lot earlier than she was to go public, but you know, of course, it was up to her. For her, it was all about just the psychic weight of knowing people are paying attention to you in a certain way. With this album, it's almost like 180 degree turn from the privacy.

The one thing I don't want put out there is our daughter's name for whatever reason. I am kind of careful not to put her picture on the internet. Beyond that, I'm compelled to just share all the details of our everyday life. I don't know what shifted in me.

I guess it feels like there's power and depth in that sort of specificity.

I feel like this particular record could be very useful for a lot of people. Have you thought about it in that way, as a way to help people who are grieving and are maybe not able express themselves as thoughtfully as you do?

That would be amazing. I haven't thought about it in that way yet. I might just be beginning to start thinking about how other people are going to take these songs or find them useful or whatever. It was just therapy for me, making these songs.

Honestly, I thought about not putting it out. I thought its work was done for me by making them. But I only know how to do this one thing where I record albums and release them, so that's what I am doing. People have emailed me already to tell me their stories and that is what they say, that it's been useful. That's amazing, actually. I never intended or tricked myself into thinking that I could be that, like performing a public service with my songs. It's very gratifying.

Phil Elverum recommends:

[This TV commercial](#) for a lighting store in Minot, North Dakota

The traditional Japanese instrument from gagaku (Imperial Japanese court music) called the "[sho](#)"

[Male choirs from Georgia](#), like the music that gets sampled in the Kate Bush song "Hello Earth", tracing back from that reference and discovering these men standing around in a conference room summoning something big and deep

Being old enough to have a chest freezer that I keep stocked with frozen foods in an organized way. Soups and stuff but also meat and fish that sometimes arrives in large quantities. Having foresight about eating.

When my daughter was being born we could hear her heartbeat on some kind of medical monitor from inside the womb, something like an ultrasound machine. It was whooshy sounding. Labor lasted a very long time and that noise was a constant. In my sleeplessness at like 4am I imagined the whooshing thumps were the sound of Mongol horsemen galloping across the steppes with Genghis Khan, tearing across the continent, just always galloping, like ghost riders in the sky, always bringing the baby to us. That's my fifth thing.

[Name](#)

Phil Elverum

[Vocation](#)

Musician, Producer

[Fact](#)

[Phil Elverum is the Anacortes, Washington-based songwriter, producer, and artist behind the musical projects, the Microphones and Mount Eerie. The most recent Mount Eerie album, A Crow Looked At Me, is a song cycle about the death of Elverum's wife, the artist and musician Genevieve Castrée, who was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer four months after she and Elverum's daughter was born.](#)

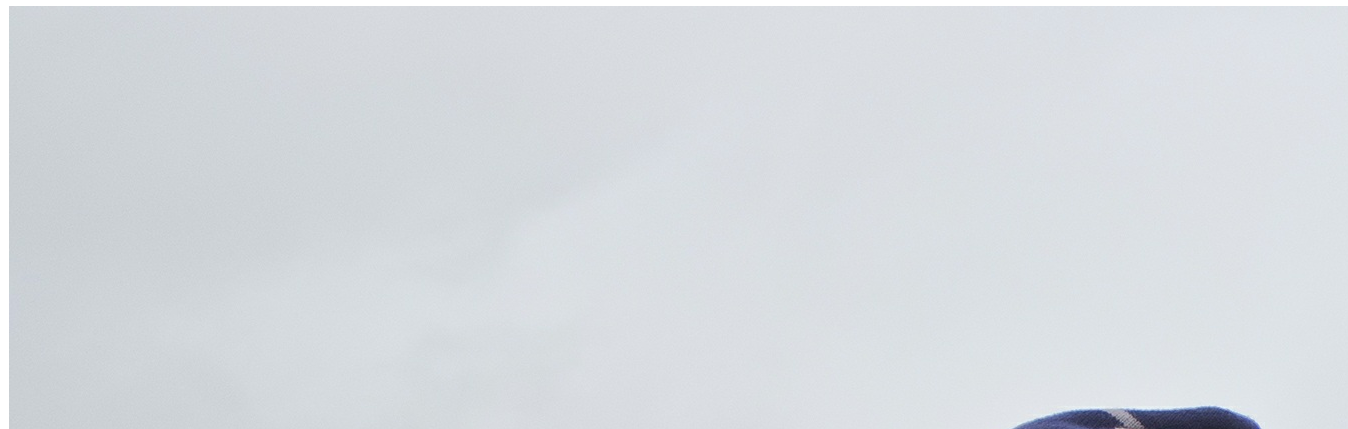




Photo: Allyson Foster