

On growing slowly



Musician Sharon Van Etten discusses what it feels like to revisit the sad songs of her early career, recalls the moment when she let go of her day job and became a full-time artist, and talks about the healthy merits of a slow build career.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2542 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#).

What's it like engaging with older material? I'm curious about the process of going back, remastering it, and thinking about it again as something in the present, versus something you did a while ago.

In returning to my first record, I was nervous. I mean, I was proud of that record and I know that everybody starts somewhere. I knew it was my first experience in a studio and I'd never played with other people before. I knew all that going into it, but when I think of how naïve I was and how heartbroken I was... I realize I could say that about every record I've made, but especially so with that first record.

So, with all of that in mind, I was surprised by how self-aware I was, for being so naïve. Or I didn't realize how aware I was, or something. I was so admittedly broken. It was humbling. It gave me perspective in that I'm still that same person, but I'm in a much better place now. It's comforting to see that I've grown and matured from that time, as obvious as that sounds.

Did you find yourself learning anything about what you do now? Or, did you discover anything you'd missed when you were in the process of doing it the first time?

How complicated my vocals were. The melodies were so bizarre, and there was rarely a real chorus in there, but I had no idea what I was doing. Then also, at the time, I didn't understand why I would need a tuner.

I literally did the whole record, recorded vocals and guitar front to back, without a tuner. I didn't realize that when Greg Weeks, who recorded the album, said, "Okay, let's try to add another instrument now," that I wasn't tuned to E. It wasn't even like a half step. I just tuned it myself. It sounds insane, but to this day, people are like, "What key is that in? I can't figure it out." I was like, "I have no idea." And there was no going back because I'd done every single song with just guitar and vocals simultaneously. That helped us keep it minimal. I kind of liked that that helped keep the album minimal, but I've needed a guitar tuner ever since.

Do you feel like it was a successful record? Years later, can you listen back and be like, "Oh, this is good." If you had to objectively think about it, how do you see that album in your overall discography?

I think they're great songs. "[Tornado](#)" is still one of those songs where some of the best metaphors I've ever written, but then I think "I Wish I Knew" is one of the best melodies I'd ever written. That melody develops over the entire song. The only line that repeats is the first line of every verse. I liked how it wasn't trying too hard to be anything. I just had these songs that I felt the need to put out in the world. I will say that it was (BaDaBing Records owner) Ben Goldberg that conspired with Greg Weeks, while I was on tour with Meg Baird, to

record these things. By the time I got back from tour, they had figured out a time and a place for me to make these songs. It represents something so important to me, too, where it was just friends trying to help me get my music out there. It was a starting point, but I also look back and I see them as really strong songs. It is an early chapter of my music life, but I do return to those songs and feel very fondly about them. I think they're really sweet and innocent and feel really strong.

I remember, around that time, when you worked as a publicist. Was it a difficult? You're promoting other people's music, but you likely just wanted to work on your own.

Yeah, I mean, I have to say Ben (Goldberg) is one of the most beautiful people I know. He has a heart of gold, that guy. I feel very lucky... I started as an intern and one of my friends that I went to college with at Middle Tennessee State was his assistant. She was teaching me what she was learning along the way, too. I had just moved to New York and was working at a wine store. I was interested in the business side of things because I knew that one day, I wanted to put out a record. I knew that I was so far from that when I started working. I didn't even want him to know I was a musician, so I didn't tell him. Then I was hand-making CDs out of my house and learning what blogs were. I had no idea.

I know it sounds silly, but it wasn't like I was an employee for a little while. He hired me after some time, but I had no idea what I was doing. I had no real aspirations other than, I love music and I love playing. I wasn't thinking of starting a real career. I just felt lucky to be able to live in New York and play at these dive bars at one in the morning. At the time, I just wanted to figure out how to keep a job and how to live in New York. Working at a label seemed really fun and working with my friend, and at the time Beirut's following was growing so fast. I learned a lot because it happened at a really fast rate.

Sometimes bands grow so fast and then shoot back down just as quickly. You can learn a lot from watching a band grow quickly-what to do and what not to do.

Absolutely. I've always been a fan of the slow build. Whether it be with my career, or my songs, or life. Just growing at a slower rate. When I look at bands today, where it is like the SoundCloud phenomenon or whatever, it's like you have one really big song and you get a record deal. Then that record does well because of that one song, but then you set the bar so high for yourself starting out, that the pressure's too much. It's much harder on kids today.

I'm in my 30s, so I'm not like a grandma by any means, but I feel like it's happened at such a rate that I don't even know what the music industry is, or how people find music anymore. I don't know how kids don't feel pressured after they have a successful song, let alone if one album's successful. The kind of pressure that's put on them by labels now... I feel bad for them.

When you were working at Ba Da Bing, you loved music, got a job, and, as you said, were just happy to be living in New York. Do you think, in a sense, that you were able to create a path slightly outside of the system? You got a job at a label. They put out the first record. Things took off. You didn't have to go through some of the hoops that people jump through. It feels like a more natural process.

I wouldn't say I didn't work with the system on some level. There were bittersweet times where I feel like I outgrew Ba Da Bing a little bit, but I also never wanted to be a crazy, big pop star. It doesn't sound right when I'm saying it, but I didn't have super high aspirations. I wanted to make music, and eventually, I realized I wanted to put out records. Until things started happening, I wouldn't know what I needed. I tried to have natural growth with the people that wanted to support me and people that wanted to know me. That's why I went from Ba Da Bing to Jagjaguwar. That felt like natural growth to me. I was still shooting for the stars in a way, but it was like I didn't want to go for something too big where I felt uncomfortable, and where it wasn't a partnership.

Do you remember when you felt like you'd become, for lack of a better word, a professional musician? Did you realize that with (it was) because i was in love, or did it come after this?

It was after that, for sure. It was maybe in between this record and Epic because I think I was about to tour. It

may have been right around *Epic's* release, but Ben would let me work from the road and he would figure out how to keep me on payroll while I was touring, as long as I kept in touch and kept up with emails. He gave me time off if the touring was too intense.

Then we had a bittersweet conversation around *Epic* because we realized that I was getting more tour offers and he kind of sweetly and sadly said, "I guess you're more of a musician now and I think you need to be on the road." Ben jokingly half-fired me, I think. It was bittersweet when I realized that my calling was more as a musician than at a label and I recognized that my publicist skills weren't great, but I learned a lot from Ben and the faith that he had in me. I still think about those days and I've learned a lot from that time.

As a musician, as a songwriter, and a player, how has your process changed from how you wrote songs and performed them back then to how you do things now?

Honestly, they all start from the same place. Over the years I've honed it a little bit, realizing what it is. I always write from a place of therapy, and whenever I'm feeling something, I sit down and come up with a chord progression and a melody and then I let myself go stream-of-conscious. Now, I can look at it and understand what it is that I'm trying to say and then think of the things that I'm saying subconsciously and shape that into more of a song, and be able to consciously admit to myself what it is I'm going through: Obviously, having a kid and being happy and trying to pursue a career, I mean the realities of what's ahead of you is heavier than some people will admit to themselves.

I feel like that's going to be a big change for me. Literally, next week I'm about to go into the studios to start recording my next record. As I'm talking to you, with a bottle in my baby's mouth and oatmeal all over my hands, I think about how hard it's going to be to step away and go back to work and the state of the world and what I have to offer this guy. My perspective has changed in that way, but my process is the same, maybe now it's just whittled down to 20-minute increments. I'm just squeezing in that time in different places now.

I'm a Pisces and a wanderer by nature, but I feel like I'm the kind of person that needs a little bit of structure. Not to say that I have a baby who's structured, but I'm excited to see how we both develop, as we learn about each other's schedule, and as we both progress this year and for our lifetime.

Does balancing family and music make you feel burnt out, or is it invigorating?

I feel like touring has trained me in some ways, because we're used to sleeping when we can. It's kind of like when you arrive in a country that you're excited to be in, but you have the worst jet-lag ever and you're just trying to squeeze everything in. You're elated and you're exhausted, but there's so much to see.

Even if I am not a natural morning person, when this kid wakes up at seven in the morning and looks at me with his beautiful eyes, it's just having that awareness that I can't be that tired. It's actually comforting that I have those instincts, because you don't know until you have a kid how things are going to feel. He's taught me so much already, and I'm adjusting.

Have you found that the new material you're writing is different?

So far, I think they're still love songs, but there's the context of a family now. In some ways, it makes it more emotional, because I'll be playing the piano and I'll be looking at him and he's just looking at me. He loves the piano. I'm singing to my child. I'm singing about the love that I share with a person, and I'm looking at what our love created. I mean, it's leaps and bounds more intense than a broken heart.

It's an interesting time to go back to your first record, too. You have a baby, a family, and you're looking back at this older, heartbroken music. It seems like a lot of things coming together at once. What was the decision to do the reissue now?

It was a handful of things. I revisited a lot of the songs for the show I was in called *The OA*. I've never done

anything like that before, and I learned a lot about myself by trying acting. I think my heart is in being a musician, but it was really fun to challenge myself in doing that.

Singing that song ("I Wish I Knew") in that setting was very, very surreal. I had to sing it over and over and over and over and over and over again. I realized I hadn't sung the song in years, and that I still connected to it was a big deal. Then people started reaching out, asking what that song was. I didn't realize that most of my fans didn't know that first record. When people go to watch the show, they don't always know I'm also a musician. That was the song that was brought into the world. It seemed like a good time.

I thought, "Okay, well how can we make this special?" I had just gotten my masters back and the song did really well on the show. And, like I mentioned, I'm also about to go back into the studio. All of these things seemed to line up. During this off time, where I probably won't have a record out for another year, why not share something that will feel new to people? Why not remind people where I came from a little bit, before I scare them with my next record?

Sharon Van Etten recommends:

Zen in the Art of Writing by Ray Bradbury

The Power of Vulnerability - a TED Talk by Brené Brown

Just Kids - by Patti Smith

The Diary of Anaïs Nin

Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke

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