

September 16, 2022 -

As told to Tasha Young, 2680 words.

Tags: Music, Sound, Process, foc, Inspiration, Multi-tasking.



On drawing inspiration from your daily life

Sound artist and producer Sofie Birch discusses documenting the everyday, finding balance through 'spiritual' practices, and not being afraid to have a narrow focus.

I saw you recently had a sound art installation in Copenhagen, where your music was playing out of grates in the ground. How do you approach your work in these different contexts?

I go a lot to these sound healing sessions—sound baths—and the experience of lying with closed eyes and you have people playing different sounds around you, it's a very spatial experience. You have this impression that the sound comes from so many places and that's something you really miss when you play on a stereo setup, I think. There's so much space between the sounds.

I was invited by the Strøm Festival here in Copenhagen, and at first they just told me about this project for 32 speakers, and I was like, "Well, it sounds cool." I sat with these 32 channels at home on my computer and listening to them in two speakers, it was overwhelming. I thought by the end that I had created something very chaotic and that's not my thing. I didn't want it to be chaotic. But when we tried it out, it was just perfect because all the natural space really made sure that the whole piece worked just the way I wanted it to be, like very peaceful and very organic and very, very beautiful.

Since you do work so much with space and movement in your compositions, how do you approach that when you're composing? Do you imagine how it will translate to all the different vectors in which people will experience the music, from headphones to a concert hall? Do you do that as well with your albums when you're touring?

I think a lot about where I'm playing live shows. I take it one show at a time, but when I get close to my next show, I'm always very curious to know about the specific space that I'm playing in, because I always feel that I have to adjust my music to the space. My music is so flexible and organic, it doesn't make sense for me to have something prepared that is very static, because rooms and spaces are so different. I learned that it's really nice to actually adjust beforehand: Is it a big room? Do I really need to bring my reverb? Sometimes I even cut certain tracks out of the live set if I think they won't fit the space.

Adjusting my live sets to the space, even on the day, sometimes it's a lot of work. But you can't just press play on yourself and then just do what you do. You have to adjust a lot, but that's also what makes the experience more interesting. I go with what is, not with what I expected something to be—which is part of my whole vision of life, really.

Tell me more about that. How that's your approach in life?

It's a part of my process that I think a lot about who I am and what I am in this world. And of course, I use my music to both reflect that, but also the other way around, to teach me stuff about life. If I learn something when creating my music or playing my music, I can always see how I can learn from it in my personal life. It's always a parallel interaction between those two. For example, I think playing live really taught me a lot about being present, not expecting things, adjusting, and going with the flow. It's really a helpful tool because it gets so specific when you look at it in your work, and then you can also see how much it can help you in your personal life.

I can imagine elements in your creative process that are very specific and must just come from being present in the moment and noticing things. You play with samples from your environment, instruments, and field recordings—it seems like inspiration is all around you, as long as you're just present and you're tuned into it. What do you do if you ever feel creatively stuck or you don't know what to do next?

I think that's where it's good to have other practices that you can go to, when you can't necessarily create something. I have a lot of "spiritual" practices, I would call it. It's good to have something where you can use your physical body to do something. It could be anything, but I like to run, do yoga, and meditate. For me, the creative or productive times are a rather small part of my life, because it's really about all of the other stuff around that. I'm only able to sit down and focus and produce because I do a lot of other stuff. It's from all the other stuff that I get the energy and the inspiration to produce something.

Even though my music is so contemplative, I experience myself as having a lot of energy. When I work, I work very focused for a very short amount of time. I'm not sitting there for two days with a little snippet and repeating it over and over again. For me, it's really about expressing something when it's there. And sometimes, you express a lot of things and you never use it for anything, because you don't want to go on with it. But for me, the magic is when you express something and it's really there when you do it.

I read that you worked on your latest album, *Holotropica*, over four years. Can you talk me through the process for creating an album over that long period of time? How do you know when it's done?

The process for *Holotropica* was strange for me and so unlike my other processes. It's been a learning experience—you can really make something different if you change the way you work. I think the central difference was that I opened up my workflow and involved other people. Along with that project, I also released a lot of other stuff where I was doing my thing more intuitively. But with [*Holotropica*], I had more frustration, because it didn't always go as I wanted it to go. Involving other people is so beautiful, but things can get complicated. But the outcome may be more alive or more interesting for more people. I think that all the frustration and the complications, somehow, gave something to the music: more depth, or a wider palate of feelings and emotions.

What made you want to embark on this new collaborative process when you've been used to working alone? Did you feel like it was time to try something new to push yourself?

I think I always wanted to do that, but I also had to find my way to do it. Creating music the way I do, with improvisations and live setups, it's a hard genre to actually involve other people. I'm not reading notes, I'm not writing any chords, I don't have any musical language other than music...How do I even present my music for someone?

It's a lot about finding the confidence while being a musician who can't hand over a note paper. That's why I use all of my past releases to build this confidence up in myself. I am a musician because I want to be, and I have so much musicality that I want to express. So, that's most important. But you always compare yourself and you always have a lot of ideas about what it is to be this and that. I had to overcome this thing to get to where I am right now, where I can just communicate the way I do and then see if I can find some other people who know what I mean. It's really so enjoyable to be where I am right now, because I have opened so many doors into other people and their ways of communicating with sound and music.

Speaking of confidence, is music is your full-time job now? How did you get to this place in your career? And, what kinds of things might have helped you along the way to get here?

I was educated as a sound designer, six, almost seven years ago. After I graduated, I immediately started a company to do sound and music for animated films—that was my dream at that point. I also had a job on the side helping disabled people. At the same time, I started to also create my own music, like experimental music, but very on the down-low. I didn't tell anybody about it. I mostly grew connections within the animation world here in Denmark.

It was a very flexible job, so I kept on doing that for a lot of years. Then, just before COVID, the first lockdown, I had this feeling like, *I think now is the time that I want to do this full on*. I started to get a lot of live shows in my calendar, and I quit my job, and then lockdown came and I was like, "Oh shit. What timing!" But, I managed to do it.

I feel that it's always good to be a bit ahead of what is actually happening. So, I wouldn't recommend waiting too long to quit your job. It's probably also a matter of who you are, but for me, it's motivating if I, a little too early, start to dream a little bigger than where I am. That's at least how I got to where I am right now. I'm sure that if I really feel in my heart that this is the way I want to go, I'm sure it will happen. I just have to believe it really. But I struggled for years with having no money. I think that's also a matter of who you are, if you can accept not to have money. Ask yourself the question if money is more important than doing what you really want to do.

I know I have a lot of opportunities because I'm from Denmark—I have a lot of privileges and I'm very aware of that. But still, at least in our society here in Denmark, I think some people could maybe take some more risks, because we have a society that helps you. Why not take advantage of having such privileges? I can just only recommend that if it's possible for you to push some boundaries and ask for some more and give yourself some extra space to listen to what you want and do it.

How did you come to that yourself? Were there times where you were afraid to take those risks yourself, and if so, how did you actually go through with that?

It's a long process, and to be honest, it's really not the easy way. But there's so much beauty in it as well. I never actually had any support from the government, which meant that, if I didn't have money, I had to take an extra job. That kept me aware of what I was doing and aware of how to spend my energy: where do I put it and what do I really want? It's about trusting the flow and trusting that if you put good energy into something, you will get good energy back. Because, if I didn't do anything, I think I would go crazy. I would rather have a job than not doing anything.

What is something that you wish someone told you when you began to make art?

That there are no rules for making art. I think I grew up with the idea of music being something in particular, but I see now that it isn't. Music is just one way of expressing a lot of other things about being a human being.

Since there are no rules, how do you edit your work? It makes sense how you described editing your music to suit the space when you're playing live, but when you're making an album and you have a lot of different sounds and samples plus the collaborations, how do you feel the shape that each track should be?

When I started making this type of music, I was really not sure about how I wanted it to sound—it was a process to develop what my sound is. The closer I get, I can hear: "Ah, wow, this is really something I always get back to," or "This is my sound," or "This is my taste." It's very interesting because as you get more confident in choosing your sounds, you are not so afraid of repeating yourself. I think that is completely okay. I think when you start doing something, you are afraid that you have to create something new all the time, but maybe we shouldn't be so afraid to repeat ourselves and see it more as fine-tuning what we really like. Why not just embrace that this is your taste in music and then work with that? It's okay to be narrow. I think that's also something I'm learning. It's okay to just choose something I like and work with that and explore it and fine-tune it and really make it something that's you and something you like and love to do.

I think some musicians today feel the pressure to produce a lot to keep up in the fast-paced, oversaturated digital media space. How do you relate to digital spaces? Do you have to set boundaries or limits with how you engage with those things to stay creative?

I think it's really a complex world to be a part of. Sometimes I'm exhausted from being a part of it [Instagram], or like, being my own PR manager, and having to balance how much of my privacy should go out to everyone and how much should I keep for myself. Sometimes I'm like, "Fuck it. Why am I spending time on this? And what good does it do?" But I have to say that I have a lot of personal connections from Instagram, and I have connected with a lot of very meaningful relationships that way. Especially because ambient is a nichey genre. It's so nice to actually connect with people doing the same thing as you.

I do have to make some boundaries for myself, because I think it's very easy to get sucked into this parallel universe. And, I really feel how it eats you if you don't control it. It's not natural for me really. I spend a lot of energy thinking about, "Oh, did I do something too much?" The days when I'm not on social media, I have to say that I'm more happy when I'm not using it. So, I'm thinking a lot about the future with social media and what I really want and what is really important.

How do you nourish yourself creatively when you're not working? For example, when you're on holiday, are you still making music or doing field recordings? Or do you say, "I'm going to take a break and just be a human being for a while"?

Yeah. It can be both. Now I have a daughter, a lot of time just goes to her, which is really nice, because then it's just about being on holiday with her and my partner. That's really nice. But I always bring my recorder and I also worked on this 32 channel piece during holidays. I love to have a project with me. It's like, I'm also relaxing knowing that I can create stuff. As long as it's not a project like film music or a commercial or something, where people ask something from you—that's not relaxing. But, creating your own stuff, that's nice.

Sofie Birch Recommends:

Burt's Bees Tinted Lip Balm "Red Dahlia"

Moon Herb Magic English Calendar

Vivo Barefoot Shoes for running

Women Without Men by Sharnush Parsipur

Portable stand for Elektron, Digitakt, Korg from Etsy.com

Name

Sofie Birch

Vocation


sound artist and producer


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