

Tegan and Sara on being honest with your collaborator



March 2, 2017 - Tegan and Sara is the Grammy-nominated Canadian pop duo of twin sisters Tegan and Sara Quin. They performed "Everything Is Awesome," their *The Lego Movie* collaboration with the Lonely Island, at the 2015 Oscars. Their eighth album, *Love You to Death*, was released in June 2016.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2865 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Politics](#), [Collaboration](#).

You have a long-term creative partnership. Is writing music still complicated, or do you have it down?

Tegan: I definitely don't feel like we have it down. Every record poses new problems or challenges. In my opinion, what's kept our band interesting is that we definitely approach music, our career, production, all of it, pretty differently from one another. We're very Yin and Yang. We compliment each other. I do think we push each other, too. We're not making a Sara record or a Tegan record ever—we're always making some sort of compromise between where we both want to be.

For instance, Sara keeps saying to me—she's said it about about three times now in the last six months—she keeps talking about Nashville and writing with country singers. That makes me want to quit our band. So annoying. Not because I don't think Nashville or country singers are great, I just wish she'd stop projecting. I can feel her projecting. I don't know if this is true, but I feel like she's annoyed with pop music or annoyed with what's happening in the mainstream, so now she's picking some sort of alternative direction. I just hate that she's trying to influence me to go in that direction.

First of all, I don't feel prepared to write a new record now anyway, so why are we even talking about it? Stuff like that will happen, but that's our process. Then I'll start playing things. Like the other day I played some rough demos and Sara basically checked her text messages, then never commented about the song.

Sara: That's not true. That is not true! [laughs]

Tegan: But that's part of the process between Tegan and Sara. That's part of what makes our band cool. First of all, neither one of us is ever blowing hot air at the other one, neither one of us is ever saying what they think the other one wants to hear—neither one of us ever goes out of our way to do that. It's not that we don't want to compromise, but we don't start from a place of compromise. We negotiate until we get to a place where we're both happy. So, we always start by truly projecting what we want. I think we do it in a way that's mostly conflict free because it's a safe space. Sara doesn't have to get the cheerleader pom poms out when I play a new song. She doesn't need to. I know Sara respects me, I know Sara likes what I do. The process is super interesting. From my perspective it's the same as it always was, it really hasn't changed.

Sara: To be fair... When I think about working in a band or collaborating with each other, it's so much more serious than a hobby. This isn't a jam band where we get together on the weekend. Tegan's not my child who I have to coddle and help raise her self-esteem. I mean, we are grown women. We're 36 years old. At this point, we've been very lucky to make ourselves a comfortable and exciting career. We didn't get there by lying to each other and saying, "Nice song, Tegan. You've got some real skills." I'm just like—either I like it or I don't. I'm not here to go, "Wow, Tegan. It seems like you really spent a great deal of time on those demos." [both laugh]

Tegan, you said you're not necessarily ready to start working on a new record. When you're in this space, between

records, do you do anything to nourish your creative side? Do you have side projects or do other kinds of things? Or is it more like getting caught up on reading books and doing other stuff?

Sara: Kind of all of the above.

Tegan: Yeah. It's a bit of all of it. I mean, we both write. Even though I'm not ready to go in and make a new record, I love making music all the time. I love repurposing old demos. We're always open to submitting stuff for soundtracks. I definitely keep the creative juices going.

Right now, it's almost like we're just taking in everything we possibly can. I think that will influence the record. The longer we wait and the more we read and see films and experience stuff and let time pass, the more interesting our next record will be. That's how I always think about it. It's not that I don't like writing, I write in between records. But I still like the longer we wait to write, or the longer we wait to really follow through with those ideas, the better the songs will be because more time will have passed.

Sara: You're absorbing and hunting and gathering. For me, it's like all of the things that were influencing me leading up to the record, I need time for those things to get out of my system. I don't want to rush into doing something and then maybe accidentally be still drawn to the same sounds or the same sort of progressions. Right now, it's really interesting listening to all the production and all the big singles and albums coming out. I almost feel like you have to let that wave go. For me, it's almost like patience, waiting for that series of breaks to happen. Then I can potentially make space to see what's going to come down the pike later. I don't want to make records that sound like what's happening right now. You almost need time to absorb enough different things that you create something new.

Tegan: I think being uncomfortable, being outside your comfort zone, and being in a room with strangers are really great techniques to challenge yourself. I think also as women, there's probably been this thing where Sara and I do have to prove ourselves every time. There is no comfort for me in music. There is no comfort in writing. I can't imagine a time—I don't know that this is a bad thing either—where I'm like, "Yeah. I'm the best," and so confident. When I see artists talking about how good they are, propping themselves up and talking about how they're geniuses... I just don't ever see a time where I'll be like that, and I'm okay with that. It makes me uncomfortable. It makes me have to try harder. I don't think I'll ever become so comfortable that I'd just phone it in. I think it's a strength that we have to constantly prove ourselves.

Do have techniques to help you move past creative blocks?

Tegan: If I start to feel bored or blocked or frustrated with something, I'm comfortable walking away. When I was younger, I pushed through or forced it... but in the last five or six years, I'll literally close a session and be like, "I'll go back to this in a day or in a week or two weeks." The second I give it space, I tend to feel more motivated to go back into it.

If I've written a track and try to come up with a cool melody or whatever, and if I start to feel strained or I can't figure out what to do, I will all of a sudden change the way I'm listening to it. I'll put it on different speakers. I'll walk around or do something else. I have this little trampoline in my studio office; I'll jump on it and do other things. For me, it's a change of scenery. Whether it's something super temporary or a small change just in the house or actually shutting the session down.

Sometimes there just needs to be faith. I'm an earworm person. If something isn't catchy... or if I work on something for 20 or 30 minutes, stop, and then can't sing the melody back to you, then to me it's no good. So, I like to delete things. Often I find if I'm struggling, I'll erase something because I don't think it's good. When I've written something that's good, I just know it's good. I don't think you can force something to be good. It's either good or it's not.

Sara: On one hand, I totally agree with Tegan. But, I also totally disagree. I'm like, "No way. You have to work on things for a long to make them good. You can't know after 30 minutes. That's insane."

Tegan: Well, that's why I walk away. That's the thing—if I'm doubtful, I'll walk away and come back. There's nothing more exciting than working on something, going for dinner or going on tour for three weeks, coming home, opening up a session and being like, "Oh shit, that was really good. Why didn't I feel like it was good in the moment?" I have absolutely no problem walking away from things, but I also feel confident that I'll be able to replace it with something better.

Sara: I think this is where we're very different, because I have a hard time letting things go. I will definitely know when to stop working on something, but I'll go back to it over and over and over and over again, and think to myself, "Maybe if I hear it fresh, I'll still want to work on it." Whereas I know that Tegan probably would have totally trashed the session. I'll definitely still take little shots at it.

I have songs from a few albums ago where I've kept certain lyrics or melodies. I'll sort of hold onto them and think, "The rest of this is garbage but this thing still means something. I'm just not sure exactly how it will fit into the future." But if I keep revisiting it, one day it'll work. I know this sounds so stupid, but sometimes I almost feel like it's not the right time for it to happen now. It's almost like a science fiction thing where it's foreshadowing, and it will eventually make sense. Then eventually I'll open a session and think, "I know exactly what this needs. It needs these lyrics, that line, or that melody from that other thing I did five years ago."

Do you find the current political situation influencing how you think you want to go forward with your music, or what you want to say with your music?

Tegan: For most of our career there would be a push from the queer community, or the LGBTQ community, for Sara and me to be more outspoken about LGBTQ rights. Isn't it powerful enough that we're two openly queer women who are on the radio? We're opening for Katy Perry or Neil Young. Isn't that in itself a really incredible, progressive act? Do we actually have to get up there and draw their attention to it? Then there was the whole part of our career where we were like, "Well, that's not good enough, we *do* want to draw attention."

On some level, I often reject this idea that I have to be saying something intensely political to be political. I just feel like at this point, it's still pretty obvious to me that being outspoken, queer, feminists in the mainstream is already still a pretty political move, if you think about it.

Sara: Tegan and I have talked a lot on this recent tour actually, about a few songs off of our new album. When we were making the album, I didn't necessarily think of them as being explicitly political. But in the months after we released the album, suddenly they took on a very different feeling. There's a song on the record, "Be With You," which for me is a political song about my choice as a queer woman—and just as a human being—not to participate in marriage. I have an incredibly difficult time with the institution of marriage. I feel like it's been a struggle for me to participate authentically in the marriage equality movement on a personal level because I just wish we were just... My politics are radical, and I want to dismantle the institution, not invite gay people in. But then when I step outside of my own personal views, I've been really moved by the movement and feel it's really important in terms of establishing equal rights for LGBTQ people. But interestingly, when we were releasing the album I didn't necessarily think the song was that political.

In today's climate, every night that we play this song, there's this really intense, visceral response from people in the audience. I see grown men singing along at the top of their lungs. I'm like, "What does it mean to them? Why is this song resonating?" Sometimes I think to myself, "Oh, If Tegan and myself weren't 5'2, pop girls, would it be different?" "If Fugazi was singing 'Be With You' would it be like a political anthem?" Is it because we're not men? Is it because we're not screaming? Is it because there's no guitars, or swords, or blood?

Tegan: On this last tour, we just toured through Europe. The reaction to "Be With You" was much more visible. Sara and I were hypothesizing backstage about it a few nights in a row. She was saying, "Are they singing along because they're also feeling against marriage?" All these gay guys and all these people standing there. I was laughing and saying that my theory was that this was because in most of the countries we just toured in for the last month, gay marriage is not legal. So, to me, when I heard the song the first time, what moved me so profoundly was that I didn't hear it the way that Sara had written it, right? I listen to Sara's music as if it's

just a song I'm hearing.

I heard the song as, even though I *can't* marry you, I don't care, I don't need it, so promise me your first born, so promise me these things, it doesn't matter. So, when I was looking out into the audience in Europe in most of these countries where gay marriage is still not legal, I was seeing these people say, "I love you anyway. It doesn't matter that the institution doesn't accept us." It's just so interesting how differently even Sara and I see the audience and feel that political undertone.

Five things / inspirations/ ideas to recommend to someone who wanted to know more about our work:

Tegan and Sara: The Official Vinyl Collection is a good place to start if you're looking for a sample of our older work. Often described as "indie rock" or "indie pop." These were our guitar and synth driven days of less polished, melancholic albums. The collection includes home recordings and demos that strip back the production and expose our early songwriting.

The Minipops! A British television show that we watched feverishly as children. It was our introduction into pop music—the twist being that the music was performed and sung by pre-teens dressed up to look like the original stars of the songs. Favorite performance was "I Love Rock and Roll."

We don't remember any controversy but as adults when we revisited the program we learned the show was cancelled after one season!

From Wiki:

"Though the series was a success for Channel 4 (gaining 2,000,000 viewers), little thought was given to the ethics of child performers singing songs originally written for older artists and dressing and dancing in a provocative style (often influenced by the original performance). Whilst embraced by children who loved the idea of ordinary children singing and dancing (as they did) along with their favourite songs, the show sat uneasily with some adults; this was capped by a performance from five-year-old Joanna Fisher, who covered the Sheena Easton song "9 to 5" (known as "Morning Train" in the U.S.) in nightclothes and included the lyrics "night time is the right time, we make love"."

Bruce Springsteen, The River, Live 1975-85

We listened to this version of The River (with gorgeous extended intro) hundreds of times growing up. Our step dad would blast it through our house-wide speaker system, or in the minivan on long drives to visit his family in BC. As moody, sullen teenagers we'd listen in the dark of our bedrooms on full blast. Springsteen's storytelling was deeply influential and is possibly what inspired our instinct to tell stories about our lives at our first performances as a band. Partly to pass the time, we never had more than a dozen songs at less than 2 minutes each, but also because it seemed like what you were supposed to do before you performed a song.

Teganandsarafoundation.org

A great deal of our energy and time is now focused on the Tegan and Sara Foundation. Launching the foundation will allow us to be more strategic about our advocacy and public activism around health, representation and economic justice of self identified LGBTQ women and girls.

Cats. Just google "cats". Videos, music, articles, memes. We really can't get enough.

Name

Tegan and Sara Quin

Vocation

Musicians

Fact

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