



INSIDE SONG

curated by
SCOTT PINKMOUNTAIN

featuring
MERRILL GARBUS
JESSE SYKES
MIRAH YOM TOV ZEITLYN

with an afterword by
THAO NGUYEN



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#30

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press culture.

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INTRODUCTION

— Scott Pinkmountain

When I interview someone, whether they're a songwriter, painter or shop owner, I generally have only one question: what really matters? It's the title I'm tempted to use for every project I undertake and the subtext of whatever I try to create. What really matters?

This is in part because I have little clue myself. Family? The environment? Self-expression (whatever that is)? Communication? Love? Presence? The future? The current election cycle? Violence? Language? Feeling good? Consciousness? Beauty? Education? Sex? Success? Intelligence? Insight? The body? Spirituality? Money? Dancing? Gender? Race? Climate change? Sports? Creativity itself?

There are, of course, several problems with this approach to interviewing. First off, it's reductive as, for most of us, many different things "really matter" in constantly shifting orders of priority. And second,

it's usually not something that can be addressed directly. It would make for some terrible reading if I tried:

Me: What really matters to you?

Them: Ooh, big question. I'd have to really think about that.

Or alternately:

Them: Everything.

So in interviews, and in my own creative work, the question of what really matters needs to be gotten at sidelong, in digestible bits. It's often expressed obliquely through the big choices we make: how we organize our time; where we live; how we earn money; how public we are with our private lives. But it's also apparent in some of our smallest choices and actions like what brand of coffee we buy, what's in our pockets right this moment, what the last book we read or album we listened to was, and in which format.

Ideally, an interview assembles a mosaic built out of these pieces, large and small. It gives us a composite image of "what really matters" to the interviewee at the precise moment of the interview. Maybe

there's value in extracting answers that hold their meaning and relevance for the subject over time, but maybe there's also value in capturing a very fleeting glimpse of someone in transition, or the last echo of someone as they used to be.

Ultimately, the value of an interview lies in the resonance and meaning it creates in the reader, manifesting as revelation, affirmation, relation, etc.

What drew me to interview the three songwriters collected here is that they so openly (if indirectly) share what really matters to them, through their creative work. The people revealed through the conversations closely resemble the personae expressed through song.

In the interviews (which were originally published in *The Rumpus* from 2011–2013), there's some talk of process, craft and mechanics of songwriting, but it applies beyond the practice of songwriting, as Merrill Garbus's, Jesse Sykes's and Mirah Yom Tov Zeitlyn's responses are aimed at the bigger target of what really matters. If there's improvisation in the process, or solitude and isolation required to write, or if technical approaches have changed radically over the years, these things illuminate each songwriter's value systems and how she interprets the world around her.

A quick note about the gender of these three songwriters. I tend to agree with the sentiment expressed by Thao Nguyen in her afterword: that “songwriter” should come first, and any gender qualifiers should come later, if at all.

The less fanfare made over the fact that these artists are female, the better, with the eventual goal that there be nothing unusual or noteworthy about three female songwriters being interviewed—other than the work and words of the songwriters themselves.

There’s still much to be done in order to balance the considerable attention given to songwriters who aren’t female, so let this collection be a drop in the right bucket.

MUSIC TURNS WORDS INTO TOUCH

interview with
Mirah Yom Tov Zeitlyn

Mirah Yom Tov Zeitlyn (born in 1974) came up in the fertile Olympia scene of the late '90s. She was part of the K Records renaissance along with bands like The Microphones, The Blow and Old Time Relijun—all highly distinct, idiosyncratic groups with Calvin Johnson's influence perhaps manifesting in the form of a primitivist or intentionally naïve approach. Mirah's early records, Parts of Human Desire (1999) and You Think It's Like This but Really It's Like This (2000) are DIY mini-masterpieces that express a punk sensibility through broken drum machines, reverb-drenched guitars and ukulele, singing with frank sexuality in an occasionally child-like voice. Even through tape hiss and out-of-tune upright pianos, one can glimpse the broad compositional range and orchestral palette that Mirah would develop.

Her more recent albums, (a)spera (2009) and Thao & Mirah (2011), are mature, complex and immaculately produced. They offer subtle, rewarding music driven

by Mirah's rich, agile voice. With just a quick look at the highly qualified list of players for (a)spera, you get a sense of how much has changed since her early days of "banging around" with a four-track by herself. Her lyrics are more abstract, her presence more assertive and her ideas are laser-clear. The one real mainstay that's never wavered is an emotional forthcoming completely free of pretense or exaggeration.

I caught up with Mirah via phone as she was preparing material for her recent collaboration with Thao Nguyen. She was extremely easy to talk to, laughed frequently, and thought hard and out-loud about each question. She's both serious and self-deprecating, and uncontrollably candid, knowing she should probably be more protective, but perhaps unable to force a professional, distanced stance—which is a large part of what makes her work so enjoyable.

Scott Pinkmountain: You seem overtly conscious of playing with your relationship to tradition. I'm curious what tradition means to you as a songwriter.

Mirah Yom Tov Zeitlyn: I think that I have come at it backwards in a way, because a lot of what I'm doing as a songwriter is not incredibly intentional. There's a moment that happens which creates the song or the actual idea for a song, and then I'm like, *Oh, it's this kind of song.*

I do notice that my songs fit all over the map, even in terms of the colloquialisms in them. I happened to be playing this really old song for my friend Thao Nguyen, and it felt like I was character acting. It was super old-timey. It was steeped in a really specific tradition, but I didn't write the song thinking, *My goal for this is a really traditional old-timey sound.* The songs come out with their references intact, almost unheeded by me. It's like they existed somehow before they met me, with their relationship to the tradition, and then they just end up coming through me at that moment because of my relationship to some certain kind of music that I've listened to in my life. I know that sounds a little bit wooey.

SP: Do you perceive yourself as part of a tradition of songwriters?

MYTZ: I have a hard time really claiming my place as a songwriter or as doing anything of import really, because I feel like I'm tooting my own horn in a way. It seems kind of like big-headed of me, like, "Oh yes, I see myself very much in the tradition of Bob Dylan, I think I'm the daughter of..."

SP: That's something I've talked about with a lot of people. How do you be a songwriter in the shadow of Bob Dylan? Is that something you think about?

MYTZ: I think some modesty actually serves me in this to just accept that I am an instrument. I'm not trying to match up to an ideal as some kind of challenge. It's more like I use the family tree of music and song that I feel has fit me as an encouragement—like it's a bed to rest in, rather than a challenge to try to better myself over, to try to...

SP: Overcome?

MYTZ: Yeah, I'm not trying to win a contest.
[Laughing]

SP: That's a good way to put it. You mentioned "a moment that happens" when you're writing a song. Can you talk a little about what that is?

MYTZ: I do experience something pretty commonly with every song. There's some moment when it clicks into its own life with its own emotional impact that I feel, and even though technically I'm the one writing the song, it's like watching a storm come in. *Here comes the wind*, and then you feel it. It can be very emotional for me actually, and that's one of the signs that I know to keep going. There's one word that kind of hits me in an emotional way, and then I think, *Oh, this thing is alive and it's my responsibility to nurture it and see it through to completion.*

SP: In hindsight, looking at the songs that triggered that emotion while you were writing them, do you feel that you can trust that emotion? Do those tend to be the songs that carry weight for you later?

MYTZ: Yeah, definitely. I think that's where a lot of my own intelligence lies: listening to my soul trying to tell me something, trusting my emotions. Sometimes I can be really stubborn and not listen well, and then it just gets stronger.

SP: Some of your songs are really straightforward emotionally, but others have a greater degree of abstraction. In your more recent songs you play with greater ambiguity (things that could be read in multiple ways), or there's some element

of fictionalization, of distance from a personal experience.

MYTZ: I've noticed with the songs on *(a)spera* the topics that I was addressing tended to be a little broader, and I was not necessarily purposefully using more cryptic language at all, but trying to use language in a different way and approach songwriting more as writer—more like prose and poetry rather than as an editorial. I do think that the emotional impact is the same for me though, because I know what I'm talking about. *[Laughing]* Yeah.

SP: How exactly did you go about trying to approach writing more literarily, if that's the right word?

MYTZ: I'm doing more deep listening, which is part of the role or job of the songwriter. I think with a lot of songwriting, songs sing themselves to you tonally and also lyrically. And it's not necessarily your own visual memories that are writing the song. It's like there are words that you can catch out there, and you have to be able to see and hear them. I was trying to listen more, and challenge myself more—not necessarily taking the easy thing, trying to gather something, put it on the page and decipher it myself, find its meaning.

SP: This is central to one of the things I'm most interested in: trying to discuss or define songwriting as its own literary genre. I'd be curious to know what your relationship is to literature, and if you see lyric writing as similar to writing poetry, or, if not, what's different about it?

MYTZ: I do feel like it's definitely more related to poetry than other forms of literature, but it's almost like cheating sometimes.

SP: Wait, what's almost like cheating?

MYTZ: Writing a song. It's almost like cheating-writing, because you don't have to finish your sentences, you don't have to use any punctuation, no one's going to edit your work. It's so wide open. People just grunt and that's a song. You can kind of do anything.

I do feel songwriting is a bit of its own creature, and the writerliness of it is freeing. It's good for people who have an innate resistance to any restrictions whatsoever.

SP: Why do you think it is so wide open? Why can you really get away with anything, like you're saying?

MYTZ: It's because of the music. The music goes into people in a totally different way than words. There's air. There's the sound of words. There's touch. There's music. All of those things have a really distinct way of meeting and entering people's bodies and souls. It's the most beautiful part about humans, that we make music. *[Laughing]* It's a very special way to communicate with ourselves and each other. So when you're talking about lyrics in the context of music, it's not just about what the words mean, and what you were thinking about when you wrote them. It's not cognitive in that same way. It's almost like music turns words into touch, which is hard to describe, like the feeling of your shirt on your back. It's a pretty delicate thing to try to put into words. You just feel it.

SP: So the words don't live independently from the music?

MYTZ: I was recently playing in this music festival and they had sign-language interpreters for all of the musicians. You had to send your lyrics in beforehand, for the interpreters to study and learn, so that it didn't all have to be improvised. So I sent the lyrics ahead, and we were rehearsing there, and the sign-language interpreter was there at the rehearsal and said, "Oh, I have a couple questions for you." And she had some questions about the lyrics and the

meaning of the lyrics in some of the songs from *(a)spera*. Specifically from "The Forest" and "Bones and Skin." I hadn't had to sit down with anyone and try to describe, in a distinct way, what I was getting at. It's not that she didn't understand the words. Each word has a definition. You know what words are. But I hadn't considered what a person who's doing sign-language interpretation for music, for songs and poetry, has to do. They basically have to write a poem in order to use an analogous feeling to the feeling that the composer, the writer, is trying to imbue. That seems so hard to me, because it's different than just translating word-for-word. That's the challenge with all literary translation, when books or books of poetry are translated into other languages. Word-for-word wouldn't make sense. Or even if it made a certain kind of sense, it could easily miss the point entirely of the feeling the original writer was trying to get across.

I had to step back into the moment of writing the song, put together the references that came up, remember some of the original content and try to put other descriptive words to the intention of the song.

I don't know if I'm making any sense. I didn't realize how hard this is for me to talk about.

SP: Keep it coming.

MYTZ: I'm a terrible sentence-finisher. I think that's why I'm a songwriter. When you write a song, there are no rules, and I think that I talk as if there are no rules. But then I run this great risk of no one understanding me at all.

SP: Do you think that that's part of the inclination towards art—expressing something that you can't express otherwise?

MYTZ: Absolutely. Every form of communication is for the purpose of feeling, experiencing, sharing. Everyone has their own intense journey through life, and you don't want to do it all alone. It's really meaningful to be able to share with people—whether it's your political beliefs, or what goes on for you emotionally or keeping track of history.

SP: Would you say that impulse to share is essentially the purpose or function of your work?

MYTZ: Yeah. All of my work. There are some songs that feel more like I want to impart a specific feeling of possibility or awareness, and some of them where I'm just singing my song and trying to share myself.

I know that a lot of songwriters write about a breakup. It's a really popular topic. I think heartbreak is the number one thing people write about. I could say that's narcissistic somehow, because they want everybody to admire how pained they are. But I actually do think there's something beautiful and uplifting about knowing that you're not the only one who is experiencing or has experienced that kind of devastating loss. Everyone has experienced that. [Laughing]

What I try to communicate is that there's a lot of crossover between that feeling of romantic heartbreak and this devastating feeling of knowing that we've punched a hole in the planet and it's spilling out oil and destroying the Gulf of Mexico and the ecosystem and seabirds and every creature. There's a person or this place that you love, and then it's being lost, and you feel helpless about it. Or you feel empowered to take a stand and do something. There are correlations between the personal and the grander scheme of things.

SP: Can you talk a little about the consistency of references to water in your work?

MYTZ: That's very interesting. I also had an interview right after *(a)spera* came out, and the interviewer said "I noticed that four out of the 10 songs talk

about bones.” And I was like, “Really!?” I had no idea I had done that. And now water. I’ve actually looked up water in dream books, because I noticed it being a big a theme in my life. As a child I had recurring dreams about tidal waves. I was terrified of water actually. I didn’t like to take baths. And the sound of a flushing toilet in a public bathroom made me run away screaming. *[Laughing]* I was really scared of water. I learned to swim kind of late. It’s a theme in my life that I’m trying to reconcile myself with water.

Also, poetically it’s just useful, because it’s a force of the world. A lot of forces of nature end up in my songs. They’re like the emotions of the planet.

SP: Touching back on this notion of heartbreak: one of the things that really struck me about your first official release, *You Think It’s Like This but Really It’s Like This*, was how happy it was in some ways.

MYTZ: Mm hmm.

SP: And then immediately after that on the next record the sentiment shifts.

MYTZ: There is a very palpable difference for me between some of my earlier songs and where my later work has gone. If I were making my dream set-list for tonight’s show, I’m probably not going to

include a whole bunch of stuff from the album that I made when I was 23.

I know what you mean about that tone. We’ve all had these experiences. You’re born and then you’re on your own, you start having relationships, you’re developing relationships to the world and your wider community, and then disappointing things happen. I remember the break up that was the impetus for some of those earlier songs and I felt really cocky like, *Well, you’re going to dump me, but I’m still really awesome!* I don’t know what I was thinking. Things progress and more disappointing things keep happening, and you’re older, and you start feeling your body change, and your family changes. Suddenly it’s like, *Wow, I am alive and things will just happen in small ways and then it’s over.*

If I’m going to hold this whole vessel of my life I have to have the emotional stamina for it. It’s not that useful to just toss things off and say, “Screw you.” There’s a deeper message of holding all of the things that you experience in your life and that you’re going to experience. You can’t stop the rough stuff from happening and you’re never going to. And that’s OK. That doesn’t mean go crawl under the covers and never talk to anyone and never do anything. It means, hold it. Just hold it.

I feel like that is what you're hearing in the difference between my earlier and later songs—that progression that I've had in my life. I'm this young artist and I'm going to write this cute song about tossing off the person who broke my heart. And then the later songs are like, *Oh man, it's just so much deeper than that.* [Laughing] I'm not the only one who's experienced that, so it's a way of honoring myself and honoring all the people in the world. [Laughing]

SP: Then how do you feel about that earlier work? I'm detecting a bit of a dismissal. You used the word "cute."

MYTZ: You picked up on my subtle or not-so-subtle language. I have re-listened to the album *You Think It's Like This*. Every couple of years there'll be some reason to. I don't sit down and listen to my own recordings very much, but when I do, it's really educational for me. It's easy to forget what it sounded like, or what I was capable of. When I listen to it now I think, *That's actually really cool. I was cool.* [Laughing] I spend so much time feeling uncool now, but I can listen to some old recording that was me going into this dark studio at night with my cassette four-track and banging around on a bunch of broken equipment literally, and coming up with a song that ends up on *So You Think You Can Dance*. *Wow. Huh.*

OK. It helps to encourage me. I'm not just making everything up from scratch all the time. I do have a personal artistic history that I, myself, can draw on. It's not just that I can make something and put it out into the world and other people can do whatever they want with it and I'll just forget about it and move on. It's useful for me to spend time appreciating some of my earlier work. Maybe I should listen to that album actually. [Laughing]

I'm sort of not quite young and not quite old right now. I'm 35 about to be 36, so maybe some of the dismissive tone you heard is me feeling a little unsure of my place in my own history. *Am I young or am I old? Am I cute or am I beautiful? Am I weird, or...who am I?* I spend all this energy working back and forth between being a kid and a grown up and I don't even know. Maybe you do that until the day you die, when you're a hundred years old? You never know if you're young or old?

SP: If we agree that your work is evolving and changing, what do you think it's changing into? Where does it go from here?

MYTZ: I have actually been noticing this past week, working on this new project, I'm kind of writing like some of my earlier songs. They're a bit more direct and have a little more simplicity—different than what

we were saying about my more recent songs and how some of the language is more cryptic. I feel like the songs I've been working on in the past couple weeks reach back more to *You Think It's Like This*-era songs. I didn't know that I was going to be doing that. Ideally I would push off from exactly where I was writing for *(a)spera*, and head into deeper, darker territories. [Laughing] Instead I'm just splashing around, which is probably good for me.

It was a very different experience working on the *Share This Place* project with Spectratone International, which was an album that's all about insects. I'd never attempted anything like that before as a songwriter. It was much more about becoming the characters, the bugs, and I was writing a play or a musical for them, although it didn't have a linear plot. Each song was like a little theater production. I took that experience with me into the writing of *(a)spera*. Through writing those two albums I started to see myself a little bit differently as a songwriter, seeing that I was capable of setting forth an intention and a subject and really applying myself as a student of songwriting, as a student of communicating these things, able to come out with a finished product. I felt really proud of the work that I did on those songs. So I imagined that the next project I worked on would progress further in that same vein. Not that I'm not. There's just something different about

it. Maybe it's because I'm working collaboratively and I'm under this time pressure. It's sort of like I'm whipping up whatever comes out and seeing if it's something I can use—which is also a good experience as a songwriter, to try to be a bit more of a production house. *All right, here's this idea. Where can we take it?* Like I'm directing myself.

I definitely enjoy working within different contexts, with different collaborators and in different locations. I need to keep feeding myself as an artist by working with different people. I see continuing with that. I've also enjoyed getting to explore different kinds of music and instruments in the last couple of years. My identity is mostly as a songwriter and lyricist and singer. I also have a lot of production ideas, but I have my own limitations in terms of what instruments I'm actually proficient at and what I can do myself, so I really love working with people on the production end—just really going for it with orchestration and instrumentation and production. That's where I see myself going: maintaining my integrity and abilities as a songwriter, but applying these to different contexts, to where I can put on a huge feathered costume and roll around in the ocean...and just keep having fun really.

SP: As a sort of musical omnivore, how do you locate the center of your work? What's at the core?

If stylistically you can move in any direction, how do you make the center hold?

MYTZ: The center for me is my heart, actually, and my emotional connection with the work. That's where authenticity comes from. It's also the first thing that hits me about other people's work, or watching other people perform, *Do I believe the person?* Even if I don't like what people are doing or if I don't like the sound, if I believe them, I do like them. I am able to appreciate them as artists. That's my goal, to stay in a truthful place. And sometimes that means writing a silly song, or singing about sex or singing about environmental destruction or heartbreak, or my grandmother. The subject isn't what the core is about. The core is about truthfulness and authenticity, and that just comes from my heart and soul.

SP: How do you invoke that emotional moment or truth on deadline? It strikes me as a skill you've had to develop—of *feeling* as a skill.

MYTZ: It's kind of amazing to me that all this work I've done has actually gotten me somewhere in terms of being able to access the feeling part even on a deadline. I think that actors probably do that, right? They're not faking it. When you're acting, you're not just making it look like you're feeling something. You

actually have to feel that thing in order for people to believe you. No one's going to hire you or come see you perform if they don't believe you. And no one's going to believe you if you're not really feeling that. That comes with training and it's not training to fake—it's training to be in touch.

SP: What is that training?

MYTZ: Experience and self-confidence. The belief that I can do this, and that I am capable.

It's a tricky one for me because I spend a lot of time wallowing in self-doubt. So I have to grab on to those moments when they come. [*Laughing*]

SP: Can we touch back on the issue of sharing? There's a notion that art that's made purely for the artist is the most noble work, and that if you care about there being an audience, that's somehow selling out.

MYTZ: I think that there is a purity aesthetic, like *I just make art because I'm an artist and I can't help it. I don't care what the critics say.* But different media have a different relationship with the public. If you're in a performing medium it's hard not to place some weight on whether or not people come to your shows, or whether or not they're enjoying them.

[*Laughing*] You can choose not to be a performing musician. You can choose to just be a recording artist. But then you run into the problem of trying to earn a living and balancing the time that you spend working on your creative efforts with just getting the bills paid. You can go off the grid and live in a cabin and make whatever art you want and also provide all the sustenance you need and not interact with anybody else.

SP: How do you respond to the notion that wanting there to be an audience is somehow selling out, given that you value the experience of sharing so highly?

MYTZ: I identify as being an independent artist. I think people often forget that indie is actually short for independent. For me, the word has a meaning more than what it connotes from an industry standpoint. I grew up in a weird hippy macrobiotic family where we had a knish bakery in the basement. I've been fortunate to have had some fairly unique factors in my upbringing. I'm also really stubborn. I'm just an independent person. Sometimes that can be frustrating, because I feel like, *How do those normal people know how to do that?* [*Laughing*]

Given how long I've been doing this professionally, I've only just started selling out recently. [*Laughs*]

Even considering something like having a song in a TV show: when I first started out, I would have just been like, "No way man, television's stupid." [*Laughing*]

SP: Would you identify your, for lack of a better word, "career" as becoming progressively more "professional?" These are horrible words, but do they speak to your experience at all?

MYTZ: Actually, I am *trying* to do that. Like I said, I've been this weird, very independent person from the beginning. It's a challenge for me to try to do anything the normal way. I meet all these younger people who are getting involved with making music these days—people have a fucking agent, lawyer and manager right off the bat. And I'm like, *Really? Oh!* [*Laughing*] I don't know that playing by the rules, in the end, helps at all. I'm just writing songs and playing music and I'm not super goal-oriented. I am kind of an artist who's doing this for art, maybe partly because I just don't understand how people do it in that other way, which is maybe for a profession. [*Laughing*] I'm still trying to figure out some of those professional aspects.

SP: I think in part why I ask (I hope I don't sound like I'm accusing you of being professional in some negative sense of the word): I guess I heard a hint

of a fond nostalgia for the nights of going into the studio and literally just Playing, in the capital-P sense of the word, you know, playing childlike.

MYTZ: That waxing nostalgic, that actually goes far beyond just the making of music. I'm not the kind of person who pines away for my twenties, but I didn't used to think about all these annoying adult things like putting money in an IRA. I didn't think about my future or my family.

I had a fine time in college, but I actually love growing up. I love the fact that I'm exactly the age I am right now—because of what I've learned in my life, about myself, and how to be a person and how to have meaningful relationships with people and how to communicate well. I thank god for learning these things. I'd never want to just stay stuck in some useless pattern [*Laughing*], which I might have had as a young person.

But I still have nostalgia for certain old-days types of things, like before...when me and all my friends were single and we had intimate friendships with each other. The ways in which we were in each other's lives was really beautiful. I have nostalgia for the time I lived in Olympia. It's similar to listening to my first record and listening to what I did on my four-track, *Oh right, that was really fun, and I felt very*

free. I listen to those recordings and I remember some of the things that I did on my own or with my community at the time. I can touch that particular kind of free feeling that is a bit harder for me to come by now. It's not impossible to develop those things again in life, but things change. I wish my grandmother were still alive. Nostalgia's just part of life and death.

SP: How, as an artist, can you work to establish freedom, or stay in contact with freedom, when you've got studio dates, and writing deadlines and tour commitments? How do you build freedom into a locked structure?

MYTZ: I feel very strongly that freedom comes from within and that you can cultivate that through practicing: practicing not getting stuck. Without going into too much detail, meditating is a fantastic way to maintain your intention towards freedom.

I think that people end up feeling stuck partly as a result of not being able to move through the difficult experiences of their lives. There are some pretty beautiful and useful methods of moving through the difficulties of your life—not just to help people with feelings of artistic freedom and creativity and imagination, but to help apply that feeling of freedom to their entire life.

A DATE WITH THE FIRING SQUAD

interview with
Jesse Sykes

The first thing you notice about Jesse Sykes and the Sweet Hereafter is Sykes's voice. It's a stunning blend of contradictions, cutting and vulnerable, breathy and scratchy, enigmatic and bare. It's so overwhelming that it can shadow Sykes's strengths as a songwriter. The more subtle qualities of her writing reveal themselves, over time, to be no less rewarding.

Much of Sykes's writing contrasts abstract metaphoric imagery with direct, concrete observations about lived experience, somehow conjoining or reconciling the two worlds. She also has the ability to invent phrases and images that sound as if they've been with us for ages, like "the open halls of the soul," or "the air is thin." She'll frequently fixate on one of these phrases, mantra-like, until the metaphor is alchemically transformed to the real via repetition, conviction, song.

The Sweet Hereafter combines Sykes's ephemeral, poetic presence (lyrically and vocally), with the grounded, sometimes muscular playing of the band. The union produces a gripping high-wire act between Sykes's raw, exposed persona and co-composer/ guitarist (and ex-boyfriend) Phil Wandscher's tightly controlled instrumental outbursts. Wandscher and Sykes's close collaboration blossomed on the lush and sprawling Like, Love, Lust and the Open Halls of the Soul (2007). The most recent album, Marble Son (2011), furthered the cohesion of the group's sound, shifting the spotlight a few degrees away from Sykes's voice (even including their first instrumental track), and creating a space for Wandscher's most cathartic and exposed playing yet, more evenly balancing the expressive elements between his playing and Sykes's singing.

I spoke with Sykes on the phone from her home in Ames, Iowa, where she lives with her fiancé, who is finishing a PhD in ecology and evolutionary biology. She was extremely open and generous with her time, and seems to enjoy a wide-ranging conversation that moves easily from music to politics to personal life, sometimes necessitating her to stop and clarify what is on and off the record. I have also heard her speak just as openly and personally between songs on stage.

Scott Pinkmountain: How've you been lately?

Jesse Sykes: I mean I've been good in many ways, but...are we off the record right now?

SP: We can be.

JS: Oh, I don't mind. I've been in Iowa and it's been insanely hot. I became sort of obsessed with climate change, just because I'm in the epicenter of it all here, you know, with this drought. The crops are dying. The fish are dying. You start getting the sense that something is wrong, that this isn't just an anomalous event. Because it's going on with the whole world.

SP: And you're surrounded by scientists.

JS: Absolutely. So I see how the whole language of science gets mutilated and politicized by non-scientists. It gets me so angry.

SP: How do these political and environmental issues manifest in your writing or your creative work, if at all?

JS: This is the first time where I've been at a loss. I'm thinking, *How could anything I do creatively ever help fill the void that needs to be filled right now?* I

feel a little bit hopeless that art in general doesn't have the ability to create change and to inspire the way it did back in the day—on a mass level. Music and art in general will always have the ability to change an individual, to inspire. But in terms of a real collective social shift and the power to make people step out of their comfort zone: I'm skeptical. I feel Indie Rock is very conservative with a lot of parameters, and people stay way inside the box. It's very safe. You're allowed to express yourself in a certain way, but, god forbid you jump out of that box, you might offend someone.

It's a weird time. People need to get radical, but it's not necessarily going to happen. And by radical I just really mean telling the truth—their own truth. I feel that is what's missing in many things now. The truth.

SP: You used the phrase "back in the day." What day are you specifically referring to?

JS: I know it's easy to aggrandize the '60s and have this romantic concept, when so many of the people that were at Woodstock are probably lawyers and accountants now. But it was the first time where Rock and Roll was new and exciting, and challenging to the status quo. There was a war and a draft. A draft is going to put a fire under people's ass. And

the music mirrored that energy. It had a frenetic intensity about it. Everything was dire. Most bands were singing to save their lives. Music sounded like it meant business—life or death.

Now when I hear a lot of music, I associate it with an iPod commercial or a Nike ad. I just see sneakers and fucking laptops and gadgets. I don't think about saving the fucking world.

SP: How do we as musicians address that or deal with that? Are we just in a post-significance era, or what?

JS: I think we are in a sort of post-significance era for sure, but I think that no one has a crystal ball. If shit gets crazy (say this drought goes on another five years and the supermarket shelves are empty and water is so scarce that people have to leave the whole Southwest and just completely relocate) if you think about a world like that, it's not going to be about selling a product anymore. Music will once again become a thing to save your life. You'll need it the way people use it in certain churches, where it's mainly about testifying and saving your soul.

When I sing, I'm testifying. I am trying to save my soul and connect with people, and I'd like to believe everyone feels that way. I just think there's a huge

spectrum of how far people are really able to delve into themselves emotionally—how much of a mess they're willing to reveal. It still happens. It's just not Arcade Fire, in my opinion. It's behind closed doors where there's no cameras, no videos, no posts on Facebook.

SP: When you think of your work as a songwriter, can you talk about an intended goal for your songs? How does your work function?

JS: I write almost like an "abstract," the way that term is used for scientific papers. It's my way of distilling these things that feel so burdensome and impossible to explain, and that's why the songs are a little bit pastoral and a little bit abstract. I think what I'm trying to do is talk about all of the things in the world I can't control: politics, what it feels like to actually *be* a human in this time, and the fact that we don't all feel things the same way. I aim to incorporate the metaphysical reality with more realism. The metaphysical world is really important to me—the way we have one foot in this weird plane that we think is reality, then there's this other world we can't quite get a full picture of, but it seems to guide us just as much.

And while I'm in the process of writing, there's this little bell that goes off and this little invisible theater

of beings that I play for. They're my subconscious. If I am somehow resonating with them, it seems to turn into a song. It's not conscious, but I just know, in terms of my take on what a successful song is, which means for me: am I even going to show it to Phil or not? If it speaks to that little internal weird group of people who sit on my left shoulder, then yeah, it passes muster and goes to the next level.

SP: When you're writing, are you tapping into that other, inexpressible world and trying to communicate some element of it?

JS: It's more about if you closed your eyes, took a paintbrush and tickled someone's face with it. It's as much about the tickling feeling as it is about the reality of the paintbrush.

It's also important to me that our music be received with the feeling of love and empathy in it. It is very much coming from that place, wanting to connect. There's a sense of what happens after you die, or the idea that everything's happening all at once, or that you've always been here—versus singing about some guy who pissed you off. I've never written a song like that. I've written about love, but not in the relationship format. Because I don't love that way either.

SP: On the exterior, you could say that a lot of your songs are about love, but there is the sense that when you're writing about love or a relationship, you're also talking about something else.

JS: Absolutely. Love is so complicated. There are so many kinds of love. I'm not a religious person, but I do believe that we're all connected. That's my religion. And love is that connective centerpiece, but it's not always about romantic love. That's such a small part of it.

I guess I'm always trying to understand it myself, that incredible sense of being alive and seeing such beauty. That, for me, is actually a very painful ride. I use the word "pain" because the feeling grabs me by the ankles and just bowls me over. It can be empathy or it can be something very beautiful you see in a human being or a situation, but I feel it so deeply, it can be hard to contain. I'm wired in a way where the life experience is off the charts. It makes it hard to function at times. And music is the way I try to not only handle that pain, but interpret it. I ask myself, "Why does it cause you pain? What does that mean?" If I wasn't in a rock band I'd probably be in a mental institution. *[Laughing]*

SP: Are you conscious of a developmental arc in your own work?

JS: Yes, I do see a lot of development. But for me it's all sort of hyper-compressed and condensed. The four records are now just like a little sugar cube in my hand. If I threw it in some water it would dissolve and I could drink it and "be" it. Because I am "it." *Reckless Burning* has so many elements that have now blossomed fully on *Marble Son*. It's just all very natural. It's my subconscious and my process of wrangling it.

It can take a really long time and luckily with music it does take a long time, because you can only make so many records. In my world anyway. You have to tour and you have to do this and that. I'm not uber-prolific. I used to feel really embarrassed by that. Now I understand it and I'm not apologetic about it anymore. For me there needs to be a pretty long stretch to A) reflect after one record cycle is over and B) resonate again with yourself and figure out *Who am I now?*

I am waiting for some inspiration. I know it's going to have to come from within, but my usual cast of characters aren't really doing it for me right now. And this is also related to being 45. You evolve to where some of those tricks aren't going to work anymore. It requires more and more each time because the stakes get higher in terms of what you're trying to

say and what you're willing to put out there to the world.

The world doesn't need another inconsequential pop song. I do think it will always need really intense music to ride in tandem with some interesting words that hopefully seem relevant to the times we are in. I'm definitely going through a sort of existential crisis right now in terms of all this stuff. I hate the fucking music business. I hate the way it's become this stupid little fucking conveyor belt for Indie Rock. If people knew how safe bands need to play it these days, because if they aren't seemingly well-adjusted, no one wants to work with them, they'd be surprised. But what real artist is well-adjusted? It's just a fucked little ass-kissy game, with a bunch of kids who rolled out of diapers yesterday. What do I have to do with it?

But I also think, *Where's the anger?* If I was 21 I'd be fucking seriously angry. I'd be like Pussy Riot. Just be radical. What the fuck? Where are all the angry kids?

You see these entitled young bands that are starting to come up now that were weaned on the tit of these Rock and Roll kiddy camps and they think it's all a fucking fun and easy process. There's no darkness or awareness that a darkness even exists. When we were kids you were emancipating yourself by being

in bands and not integrating with the status quo. It was a big deal. When I was 14, no other girls were in a band. Parents would look at you and think, *Oh she's trouble*. You were instantly thought of as a slut and druggie. Music on that level: it's just lost its balls, its poignancy.

It's like a set of waxed balls now—like guys who wax their balls. Don't you think? Come on! [*Laughing*]

SP: You've talked about this internal audience sitting on your shoulder while you're writing. Can you describe to me who's in that audience?

JS: It's probably changed and evolved, and it's kind of funny because just the other night I was telling my fiancé that I think they're all dead. And he was saying, "Well that's a good thing. You are literally at your full power. You're not even needing to be witnessed from external forces." That being said, when I've written a song in a split second, where I go "Wow," and I feel like I'm being witnessed by something and I can't explain it but everything converges, it does feel kind of divine.

But that internal audience, they're not people who exist in the world. It's not like David Frick from *Rolling Stone*. There is an essence, maybe, sort of like my childlike interpretation of this court that is there to

guide you and help you interpret if you're on the right track and if you are indeed evolving. They're faceless and it's these strange, gray, almost spectral beings—what I, along my journey, perceive to be the highest echelon of greatness, which I aspire to.

I think we all aspire to do something of greatness, but we all probably, most of the time, feel like what we do is child's play in comparison to the great works of art out there.

There is no one any more that can give me a cerebral woody [*Laughing*] in terms of validating me. The people who write *The New Yorker* are probably 25 years old now. They're all into Bon Iver—the obvious shit. I've been let down by some of the external validation.

SP: You reach a certain thing you're striving for and you recognize that it's not giving you what you hoped it would give you.

JS: Yeah. The first time you get a mention in *Rolling Stone* or *The New York Times*, it's fucking epic. But after that there's a point where it's great, but it's not the thing to shoot for and it's like, *OK, I've hit that milestone, now what?* It's a good kind of freedom if you're fortunate enough to hit those milestones. I don't want to ever take them for granted or make

light of them, but it does free you once you're in the circle, so to speak. All that it becomes about is the work for yourself, and that's where you get to find out if you're pure or not. You get to really know, *Was part of this propelled by external needs or validation?* If the ratio was off and too much was for that, you'll never continue.

When it's just a void that you're looking into, and all that illusion is gone, it's the biggest freedom in the world, but that doesn't come without a cost. There is no man behind the curtain. There's no great reward. You just do what you do.

It's a big *I Don't Know*.

SP: Artists have to peel back a layer of vulnerability, but it also takes a tremendous amount of confidence to get up there and sing, especially in such an unadorned context. Your music can be very spare with a lot of space around the vocals, so it's really exposed.

JS: When I'm actually on stage, there are times I am thinking, *Why am I doing this?* It's like a date with the firing squad. You feel so vulnerable. Every insecurity you could ever imagine comes out. For me, at times, I just feel ugly. I don't want to be seen. But then something happens where (when I'm actually

singing) I wrangle that horrible feeling and all that self-hatred turns into something really beautiful. It's a powerful thing to experience. It absolutely feels, in those moments, like you're right where you're supposed to be. But then as soon as it's done, you're just raw again.

SP: How do you work? Do you write everyday? Do you run off to a cabin for a week?

JS: Normally with each record you'd tour, tour, tour, then you'd have that time where it's looking like the skillet's not so hot now—time to just write. In those windows, which were usually six to eight months, sometimes a year, I would just stay home. I always say you just need to make yourself available. That can mean you're writing, but you might be ironing clothes or folding laundry or doing something else. You have to be home. You have to be available.

Now I have nothing but fucking time, and I can't write! So *Pfft*, I don't know what to tell you. I've written some, but it feels painful. Like sitting down, playing my guitar and singing almost feels like something's pressing down on me. So I'm just waiting, doing other things while whatever it is that's not at peace within me goes through its process. I'm at its mercy.

I'm trying to be different now, where I'm saying, "Well maybe I need to do everything wrong and see if the songs come." I think the band's (this last incarnation's) temporarily breaking up just devastated me. So I think there is a lot of that sadness going on and I'm just not talking about it enough. It's going to take some time to let go. The beauty of all this suffering is that when I do "let go," it will have all been worth it.

INTUITIVE LANGUAGE

interview with
Merrill Garbus

Merrill Garbus's music is hard to define or readily summarize. Her song forms are asymmetrical, filled with jagged lines, sharp turns and jump cuts, yet simultaneously deliver a steady dose of catchy hooks and memorable choruses. Her tonal language is more dissonant and chromatic than you'd expect from something so danceable. Her swooping vocal glissandos and ululations could be heard as cartoonish, but are delivered with such conviction that they feel totally appropriate for the context she's created. The various stylistic reference points (hip-hop beats, avant-garde horn flourishes, Bosnian women's choral harmonies, R&B vocal virtuosity, Olympia indie folk ukulele) are filtered through such a personally crafted lens as to call into question whether they are in fact influences or simply coincidences.

The music coalesces into a kind of uniqueness that generally comes from one of two extremes: either

the accomplished musician who has assimilated so many techniques and approaches as to gain the freedom to shatter pre-existing formulas, or the wide-eyed outsider novice who has no pre-existing notions of those expectations to color or constrain her work. In some ways, both are true for Garbus.

While she is completely self-taught as a musician, she is a highly trained artist, just in another field. She has an extensive background in theater, having studied it as an undergrad at Smith College, then working with the Sandglass Theater in Vermont. She developed a strong aesthetic identity and philosophy, and, with that in place, shifting media appears to have been mainly a matter of applying an already internalized set of answers (or more likely, questions) to a new set of physical techniques.

On her first album as tUnE-yArDs, Bird Brains, you can literally hear that process in action—the tinkering invention of the improviser at work, captured directly to tape, fearlessly accepting and incorporating so-called “mistakes,” and rising to the challenges they present. By the recording of whokill, these qualities are embodied with such confidence, executed so masterfully, to the point where no listener need question Garbus’s intent or technique.

Scott Pinkmountain: I got the sense from songs like “Hatari” on *Bird Brains* that you compose to tape. There were performance inconsistencies that seemed to be raised to a formalistic level. It gave me the impression that you’re recording and composing at the same time.

Merrill Garbus: Yes. Absolutely. That’s what’s so cool about recording, to me. It’s its own kind of lab improvisation. Before working with Eli Crews, the engineer for *whokill*, I clung so much to having my hands on the thing, and that’s why. It is a type of composing for me. Especially since I’ve never been to music school and really can’t compose on paper unless it’s geometric shapes.

Sometimes I listen to “Hatari,” for instance, and go *Wow. I left that in there?* Especially on the first album, it was really like, *First thought best thought.* Whatever came out of me in that raw state was most often what stayed, including being out of tune in my singing, being less precise in rhythm or with the playing of the ukulele.

SP: Did that change at all between *Bird Brains* and *whokill*?

MG: Yes and no. With the first album, I was definitely recording more than I was performing, and, as you

say, composing through the recording process, then often translating to the live stage after that. *whokill* was the opposite way around—live first, really composing through live improvisation with the looping pedal, then recording songs the way we'd been performing them.

But once we had stuff down, I thought, *Oh there's no way that this is a tUnE-yArDs album. This is a live record of what we've been doing, but this doesn't sound like me and the recordings I want to make.* My original intention was to mix the whole thing myself, which now I laugh at because I have so few mixing skills. But I got Pro Tools and I took the files and I just went on editing and composing that way again. Songs definitely shifted through that process, so that was a whole next level of composition.

There were probably four or five upheaval times while I was making *whokill*. I would think, *No it's going to be this thing now. Noooo, that's not working out.* I edited a lot of stuff on my own. Eventually I came back to Eli and had him mix the tunes with me and Nate Brenner from tUnE-yArDs in the room. Doing the album in stages like that helped give it a layered quality.

SP: Could you talk me through a typical composition process for one of the songs on *whokill*?

MG: "Gangsta" had a pretty clear process. A lot of the songs on that record came from me improvising on the looping pedal. On the first record they were much more ukulele-based. This time around I was visiting Oakland. Nate and I had just gotten together, so I was just here as a visitor. He would leave for some of the day to work or go to rehearsals and I was left to experiment, partially with his drums. Most of the songs start musically rather than with a lyrical idea. And that was certainly true in this case.

I had this thing in my head for *bom-buh-buh-BUH-bo buh-bom-buh-buh-BUH*. The rhythmic idea first. Then I made the siren loop with the looping pedal. It was just those two things together for a long time. The rhythm reflected to me a kind of toughness or strut, like a macho stance or posturing. That intersected with what was going on outside the apartment window, which was that these kids were starting to get guns and get arrested. They were just teenagers and we were following what was happening. The words came from that—an intersection of the music with the neighborhood situation I found myself observing.

With a lot of songs too, at a certain point I'll say, "OK Nate, time for bass." There's so much room for him there, especially when I'm just working rhythmically and with a couple other elements. So

we'd get together and he'd try a bunch of things, and we would go through this awkward process of me sculpting and changing what he was doing, and him being extremely patient with me asking him to try different things. I'd give him vague directions like, "No. More out of tune." Or "Less in the key it's supposed be in and more in the key that's a half-step up."

We were touring with Dirty Projectors at that time, and just played it in front of people in a very unfinished and awkward state. It was a priceless experience to have an audience for that moment of experimentation—a really generous audience most of the time. I could instantaneously see what was and wasn't working.

SP: And that definitely yields different results than working alone in your bedroom?

MG: Totally. They're clearly different albums. I'm sure I've just begun to understand what's different about this. There is a new level of vulnerability. There's also a new level of pressure—especially now that tUnE-yArDs has had so much more exposure than it ever had in the past. That's become a new conundrum for me: how to write without being self-conscious; how to write with the positive aspects of knowing

there are people out there listening, while leaving the negative aspects of that behind.

SP: So how do you do that?

MG: I don't know. I wish I did. I think in some ways I'm making a bigger deal out of it than it actually is. Every musician is vulnerable. All musicians know their music is going to be heard by other people. That, in and of itself, is terrifying on some level. At least that's been my experience. The fact that now there are thousands of people listening...it's a new level of that vulnerability, but it's the same thing.

I guess it'll be the same as last time, when I go, *Well, fuck it. This is what I hear. I can't be self-conscious.*

I think what it's going to mean for me is really taking a substantial break from touring. Touring takes you into the minds of your audience, which is great. But it takes you out of that place you need to be in as a composer, where you're left alone with your ideas.

SP: Jumping back to process for a second, do the words come after you've already developed vocal melodies?

MG: Yes. And often that means that [*Singing wordless melody*] is how it starts: "Blah blah blah

blah blah, gangsta.” It starts way more with the sounds of the words and the sounds of the vocal melody than trying to shove words or ideas into a melody.

SP: On the hierarchy of the compositional elements in your music, what significance do words have, or where do they fit?

MG: They’re totally crucial, but there are songs where I feel like, *Oh yeah. That was the right word. That was the word that I meant to use.* Then there are songs where I feel more like, *Well, I tried on this one and I’ll do better next time.*

“Es-so” on *whokill* was derived from very stream-of-consciousness things going through my head during my plentiful walks around Lake Merritt in Oakland. There were so many possible words that what I eventually settled on was sort of arbitrary. Sometimes I think I should change the words every show because this is what I’m feeling today and that was what I was feeling then. I believe they have the potential to mean a lot to people, and seem to mean something to some people, but they were just random thoughts that I was having in my head and less of a constructed poetry.

On the other hand, I believe in a magic that happens in sound. When you go back to how language was originally formed, I really do think that a lot of it must have had to do with sounds and which ones sounded like the thing you were talking about. I tend to rely heavily on that kind of alchemy, where if I just start with a sound, then the right words will appear, and that appearance (if you wrote it out in a sentence it would be nonsense) evokes far more to people than a more correct-sounding sentence.

That’s no revolutionary idea on my part, but sound is my way of accessing the magical abstract language that can hit me in poets like Cummings or Joyce—people who are writing in a channeled kind of way. Gertrude Stein. You sort of go “*What??*” but something about it really hits you as a human, the way the words are put together, the choice of words.

SP: How do you hear music? When you’re listening, what do you prioritize? Where does your ear gravitate first?

MG: Probably rhythm first. Words are probably last. Rhythm and (I guess I should just call it harmony) notes intersecting with one another as opposed to melody. So rhythm, harmony, melody, words in that order.

SP: So the vocals, the quality of the lead voice, is not necessarily the first thing you're hearing?

MG: No. I was recently working on a track that had very specific guidelines. It's sort of a cover of a theme song, and they asked if tUnE-yArDs would do this for a television show. So because these other elements are more important to me, I decided that the lead vocal should be done in a light, childlike voice. I sent it in and the comment was, "What's up? Where's the Merrill vocal?" The Merrill vocal is strong and powerful and chesty, and you know... whatever.

I realized I can think all I want about the flexibility of my voice, but from the outside there's a very specific character that people are hearing and now looking for. Which is interesting because, in my mind, every one of the songs on the album has a different vocal quality to it.

So no: apparently I'm not thinking about that as much as some other people do.

SP: You do have such a versatile and constantly changing vocal approach. Is there something about playing characters or inhabiting roles in what you're doing?

MG: When you do theater vocal training, a lot of it is to awaken different characters of your voice. So I have that practice, but it's not like Nicki Minaj actually embodying different characters in one song. What she does is completely amazing. In her rapping, within one verse she'll take on two or three different caricatures of people she's invented. I don't ever think about these character changes in my voice like that. But there's a physiological training I have to let my voice do different things and not judge—just let it come out.

Like with the song for the TV show I was talking about, I'll think, *This is my instinct to sing it like this. My voice wants to do this in this range to fit the mood of the song.* It's on a song-by-song basis, but not necessarily a kind of rule or character that I'm embodying.

SP: I was really struck by that with your voice: a willingness to be outrageous.

MG: Certainly with the experience of performing in front of people a whole bunch, you start to get used to making a fool out of yourself and develop a harder shell about that. I did a lot of improv comedy and that's exactly what it's about—falling flat on your face in front of people.

The guitarist Ava Mendoza and I are working on this Buster Keaton silent-film project, scoring some movies for the San Francisco Film Festival. It's that kind of slapstick sense of things. When you act the fool like Buster Keaton or Fatty Arbuckle, it gives people a real freedom in themselves. I've realized I don't need my ego intact that much. I could sacrifice and make a fool out of myself if it meant that the gift of the performance was a kind of freedom that everyone would have. That's what I commit myself to when I perform.

SP: It strikes me that there's a new archetype on the rise that you're tapping of the female version of the Fool or the Gadfly. Does that resonate for you at all?

MG: Totally. Put that in there. Particularly because often there's not a female version of anything. So for that sake, yes. Let's do it.

I think a lot, as I'm sure many people do, about the incredibly crazy state of the world, and an important thing that I forget to do is laugh about what can be laughed about. I was talking to Ava about Eastern Europe. One of her parents is from Serbia and one is from maybe Bosnia. She was talking about people in recently war-torn countries having a dark, dark sense of humor, but a brilliant one. Humor is such a huge part of surviving trauma.

All that's to say: I will gladly carry the humor torch if that's something I can do. There are many female comics who I think find it to be an incredibly difficult thing. As a woman performer, it's sort of suggested to you that you look good. So if you look bad or foolish on purpose, or act really grotesque on purpose, you're really going against the grain. I would proudly stand in the brave ranks of those women.

SP: We're kind of skirting around the edges of overt feminism and politics in song, and I wanted to touch on that a little bit. I take it to a certain degree you're thinking actively about political music.

MG: We can talk about what that means. But in a short answer, yes.

SP: Let's *do* talk a little about what that means to you.

MG: I guess the reason I say it that way is it's a question I'm getting asked a lot lately: "So, you're a political artist. How does that make you feel?" What troubles me about that conversation is that there's a differentiation being made between a human being and a political human being. It's just my understanding that being a human means being aware of the world around me, and my place in that

world, and my part in what's going on in the world around me.

I'm not political like, *I want to make you feel this particular way that is my political stance*. And sometimes I worry people think, *Oh she's a political artist*. I don't want to hear chanting slogans about the Democratic Party. I don't want to listen to her music. Mostly I want music that makes me feel good when all I want to do is turn on the pop radio station and feel good. What I've been wondering is how can we feel good in music and also have material there to chew on once we've listened to that song 20 times. Can loving music be not a guilty pleasure but a real meaty pleasure?

Sorry if you're a vegetarian.

I don't feel like I'm any more or less political than the people around me, but maybe I'm just talking in my songs about how I feel as a human being in the world in an honest way. And when you talk about being a human in that way without trying to throw up a haze or film or glossy sheen on everything, then maybe what's left is politics.

SP: There's certainly a move between the two records—the first record being more internal or

inwardly focused and the second record pivoting to the outside world. What was behind that move?

MG: I was trying to create *whokill* from the current place I was living my life, and that happened to be one in which I was far more exposed, in terms of the public knowing who I was, and also one in which I had moved to Oakland away from Montreal, which is quite idyllic. It's a city, but it's a beautiful, wonderful, low-crime city. I wasn't conscious of anything other than just being honest about what was going on with me in my life at that point.

SP: What significance does children's song or children's music hold for you, or what kind of role does it play, either for you as a songwriter or for listeners in general?

MG: One thing that comes to mind is in the song "Little Tiger." On the first album I sing, "Eeny meeny tiny miny, catch a little tiger by the toe." In that case it was these memories of songs that you have in childhood, which upon adult reflection you find different things in. Darker things. "Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop" is a really dark song, but at the moment that you're being sung to as a child, you're often just taking it as a very comforting thing.

I always appreciate children's music and books and art when it's also relevant to adults. And I think parents do too, of course, when they can get as much out of a book as a child does. That to me is a brilliant piece of work because it's almost like you're writing in code or something.

Children's rhymes also have a lot of onomatopoeic words and percussive words. They're associated with sound and early language—these kind of sonic memories and word memories. I love that kind of language. It's about the sound, versus the more adult, classical, meaningful language. It's a more instinctual or gut language.

SP: You use your voice so instrumentally. When you're writing a song and you get to the wordless melody, do you ever think, *That says what I'm trying to say already. It doesn't need the words. It doesn't need the linguistic component because it's already expressing the thoughts and emotions that I was feeling in the making of that song.*

MG: Yes. Though when I'm creating a pop album, I also realize that a really important part of pop music, at least in my mind, is words. And words for people to sing along to.

I'll improvise something, a song that's gibberish, gestural. Whether it's a vocal gesture or a facial gesture, whatever it is, there are very few words involved, and, at the same time, I feel like I'm putting across a lot of feeling and meaning that people can really identify with. But because I'm in this genre where people do call upon words as a point of access to the song, I have a great incentive to keep going—crystallizing what I really mean with those sounds. Some of those words are still going to be nonsense, but I push to keep going and challenge myself to clarify what I mean as much as I possibly can.

SP: You conceive of what you're doing as pop music?

MG: Yup.

SP: Even though the sound of your music is unusual for what might be considered pop?

MG: Yup.

SP: How important is it to you to be intentionally creating a new sound or a distinct sonic artifact versus just making pop?

MG: It's quite intentional. I wouldn't be making music if I didn't believe that I was contributing *something*

to the future of music. That sounds *really* egotistical, but that's how I feel. I'm extremely self-critical, and part of that is asking, *Is this worth anything? Is this adding anything to the field?* Because if it's not, then I'm just another person throwing garbage out into the world. And if it is, then maybe I can justify my existence here on the planet. That's where my brain goes. So yes, I don't know to what degree I *can* do it, but it's certainly my aim to be furthering music, and I guess maybe I'm just more comfortable furthering pop music because I think there's a long way for it to go.

SP: How do you understand, just for your own terms, how such unique music has connected with so many people on such a large scale?

MG: I don't know. Gosh. I can't believe it. I totally think, *Wow, this is so weird. Who's going to listen to this? Or, at other times I go, I just wrote a soul song, and I'm not really a soul singer. What is it doing here?*

I do think that dancing has a lot to do with it. Physical motion. People are ready to be captivated by music to that point of being compelled to move by it. That's maybe the other reason why I put myself in the pop genre. I love that connection with people. It gets away from the intellectual judgment of music and

into a real visceral understanding and appreciation of the music.

But also on another level, a lot of the songs on the album *whokill* were directly influenced by *Thriller*. I thought, *I just want to make, for this millennium, a punk, feminist version of Thriller*. I wanted that degree of accessibility on a musical level. So even though I weirded them up, sure, a lot of the songs have grooves. A lot of them have super-catchy melodies and super-catchy horn lines. I wanted that "mass appeal." I'm not sure how "mass" that mass is.

AFTERWORD

— Thao Nguyen

I draw a lot of inspiration from learning about other songwriters' writing habits. I want to know what compels them to write. As a fan, I like to know how they arrived at songs I love.

I love to hear about when they go on tears of productivity—those fabled stretches of propulsion, where they could not *not* have written, where words or music visit them and they are true vessels. I like to know and be reminded it's possible for when I'm up shit's creek with writing.

Hearing about how productive people are also makes me feel guilty. If you can channel that guilt in a positive way, you benefit: you focus, and you make things too. If you let it hold your hand/push you down into a self-loathing spiral, well, then you just have more reason for which to loathe yourself.*

*I've heard.

I always ask other songwriters about their writing routines, if they have one, how disciplined they are, if they go through bouts of ultimate and remarkable low-grade, slow-burn desperation, peppered with spikes of “I AM BULLSHIT,” countered with maybe two seconds of “I AM AMAZING.” I like to hear that it all works out in the end, because it does, but sometimes we make it so hard. And you wonder, *If I can maintain a level-headed perspective throughout the entire writing process, will I avoid taking years off my life?* But maybe you need that panic.

I wonder how other songwriters have more discipline than I do. (I don’t know that for a fact—just seems like a safe bet.)

I think it’s dangerous and problematic and reductive to qualify songwriters based on their gender and to stop there. It’s also incredibly vital, and an obligation of those willing to undertake it, to understand and appreciate and amplify the voices of writers who are not straight white men. I yearn for some kind of cross-breed report wherein the first thing a songwriter is called is a songwriter, then she gets described by what she makes and her perspective and experience in the world as whoever she is, by her writing voice and what it is about her contribution to the soundscape that said reporter likes.

Or some version of: *I love this songwriter. I hope guys don’t try to take pictures up her dress while she’s performing onstage.*

You can’t be a woman/female-bodied person onstage or in front of any lens and not feel the weird, sometimes unsettling, often disheartening pressures, demands and vulnerabilities of being a woman/female-bodied person in this society.

Also, you absorb more critical eyes and ears, and perhaps sometimes you’re underestimated where others might not be. People feel entitled to you and your body in a way that they wouldn’t otherwise, and sometimes they say just absurd things.

Merrill Garbus and I trade off calling/texting/emailing each other for support and camaraderie. Our album cycles have fallen in such a way that when one is on tour the other is off, and the one who is off provides calm and stability and soothing reassurance for all things music-business- and writing- and tour-related, while the other is at any point just freaking losing it.

I haven’t had the fortune of working with Jesse Sykes, but I’ve been knockout lucky enough to work extensively with Mirah and Merrill. Both have changed how I write, how I play music, how I value and take care of my job and the things I make, all for the absolute better.

AUTHOR BIOS



Merrill Garbus's early creative work was in puppetry and theater. She formed tUnE-yArDs in 2006 and the band has released three albums since 2009. Garbus is based in Oakland, where she lives with Nate Brenner, her partner and primary collaborator in tUnE-yArDs.



Thao Nguyen formed her band, Thao and the Get Down Stay Down, in college, and released her first album shortly after, in 2005. She spent the majority of her twenties touring, and recently took a full year off from music, focusing her attention on political issues and prisoner advocacy. She has collaborated extensively with both Mirah and Merrill Garbus, releasing the album *Thao & Mirah*, which was co-produced by Garbus.



Scott Pinkmountain (aka Scott Rosenberg) is a writer and musician living in Pioneertown, California. His work has appeared on *This American Life* and in many publications. He hosts the [Make/Work podcast](#) on *The Rumpus*. He has also released dozens of albums of both instrumental music and songs. His work can be found [here](#).



Jesse Sykes formed her current band, The Sweet Hereafter, with Phil Wandscher in Seattle in the late 1990s. They've released four albums, often in collaboration with producer Tucker Martine. At the time of the interview, Sykes was living in Iowa.



Mirah Yom Tov Zeitlyn started performing as a college student in the '90s, steeped in the indie-rock scene of Olympia. Her early low-fi experiments and home-recording style helped define the sound of the K Records catalog. She has collaborated with Phil Elvrum, Jherik Bischoff and The Black Cat Orchestra, and is currently based in Brooklyn, NY.



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