

MUSICIAN

Gordí

Interview by Tina Essmaker

August 22, 2017

FOLKTRONICA SINGER/SONGWRITER SOPHIE PAYTEN, AKA
GORDI
HAILS FROM RURAL AUSTRALIA, WHERE SHE GREW UP ON A
FARM
SURROUNDED BY WIDE-OPEN LANDSCAPES, AND A FAMILY WITH
A DEEP
APPRECIATION OF MUSIC. HERE, SHE OPENS UP ABOUT GOING
AWAY
TO BOARDING SCHOOL AT AGE 12, AND HER EVENTUAL PATH
TOWARD
SONGWRITING; ABOUT THE RESERVOIR—THE NAME OF HER NEW
FULL
LENGTH ALBUM, AND A METAPHORICAL SPACE THAT INFLUENC-
ES HER WORK; ABOUT FOLLOWING THE “GREEN LIGHTS” TO-
WARD WHAT’S NEXT; AND HOW SHE MANAGES TO BALANCE HER
CREATIVE LIFE WHILE FINISHING A DEGREE IN MEDICINE.

“I went to a Missy Higgins show and I remember leaving the show with this feeling of warmth in my chest. I thought, that’s what I have to do. I want to make people feel the way I’m feeling now.”

Q: YOU GREW UP ON A FARM IN RURAL AUSTRALIA. TELL ME ABOUT WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO GROW UP THERE AND HOW YOUR CHILDHOOD INFLUENCED YOUR IDEAS ABOUT CREATIVITY. I GREW UP OUTSIDE OF A LITTLE TOWN CALLED CANOWINDRA ON A FARM CALLED ALFALFA. IT'S A BEAUTIFUL PLACE—MY FAMILY HAS LIVED ON THAT PROPERTY FOR ABOUT 120 YEARS. I HAD A GOOD FRIEND WHO LIVED DOWN THE ROAD WHO HAD HORSES, AND SOMETIMES IN THE AFTERNOON WE'D CATCH THE BUS HOME AND GET OFF THERE AND RIDE.

A: MYPARENTSHADAGARDENTHATSPRAWLEDOWNANDMETTHEPADDOCKSTHATMETTHERIVER. THE ROOM WHERE ALL OF OUR MUSICAL INSTRUMENTSWERE KEPT OVERLOOKED THIS, AND I GREW UP PLAYING THE PIANO LOOKING OUT OVER THAT MAGNIFICENT LANDSCAPE. WHILE IT'S NEVER INFLUENCED MY LYRICAL CONTENT DIRECTLY, I'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO PRESERVE SOME IDEA OF SPACE IN THE SOUNDSCAPES OF MY SONGS.

Q: DO YOU COME FROM A MUSICAL FAMILY, THEN? YOU MENTIONED A ROOM FULL OF INSTRUMENTS. YEAH, (LAUGHING) MY MOM IS A PIANO TEACHER. SHE HAS NINE BROTHERS AND SISTERS, LIKE A GOOD-OLD-IRISH CATHOLIC FAMILY. THEY HAD A VON TRAPPE-SQUE VIBE GOING ON, AND COULD ALL SING AND PLAY INSTRUMENTS.

A: I'M THE YOUNGEST OF FOUR, AND WE ALL LEARNED THE PIANO GROWING UP. THEN MY BROTHER STARTED TO LEARN GUITAR, AND I COPIED HIM. I NEVER HAD LESSONS, BUT I PICKED IT UP AND LEARNED SOME CHORDS. I STOPPED PIANO LESSONS AT ABOUT AGE 12, BUT I KEPT PLAYING, I LIKED BEING SOCIAL, BUT I ALSO LIKED CARVING OUT TIME FOR MYSELF. PLAYING MUSIC WAS THE WAY I DID THAT...IT BECAME A REFUGE FOR ME."

"I've always tried to preserve some idea of space in the soundscapes of my songs."

Q: HOW DID THE ROLE OF MUSIC CHANGE IN YOUR LIFE DURING THAT TIME? I RELEASED MY ANXIETY ABOUT MOVING AWAY FROM SUCH A FAMILIAR AND HOMEY ENVIRONMENT THROUGH SONG-WRITING. I WAS GRAPPLING WITH ALL OF THE THINGS TEEN-AGERS GRAPPLE WITH, AND LIVING INDEPENDENTLY AT SUCH AN EARLY AGE, WHICH FORCED ME TO GROW UP QUICKLY.

A: I LIKED BEING SOCIAL, BUT I ALSO LIKED CARVING OUT TIME FOR MYSELF. PLAYING MUSIC WAS THE WAY I DID THAT. THERE WAS THIS ROOM BELOW US, WITH A BEAUTIFUL GRAND PIANO. IN THE FIRST YEAR OF SCHOOL, I REMEMBER PUTTING MY EAR ON THE FLOOR BECAUSE I COULD HEAR SOMEONE PLAYING. IT WAS A PRIVILEGE THE OLDER GIRLS HAD TO USE IT WHENEVER THEY WANTED, SO I'D WAIT UNTIL NO ONE WAS THERE, AND RUN DOWN AND PLAY AS MUCH AS I COULD UNTIL AN OLDER GIRL KICKED ME OUT. IT BECAME A REFUGE FOR ME.

I STARTED WRITING SONGS, AND EVEN THOUGH I HADN'T HAD MUCH LIFE EXPERIENCE, I FOUND THAT I HAD ENOUGH TO GET SOME WORDS OUT. EVENTUALLY, WHEN I WAS 16, I GOT A GROUP OF MUSICAL FRIENDS TOGETHER—ONE PLAYED VIOLIN, ANOTHER VIOLA, AND ONE ON PIANO. I PLAYED GUITAR. I HAD WRITTEN THIS SONG, AND SOME PARTS FOR EACH OF THEM, AND I CLEARLY REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME WE PLAYED THE SONG. THEY NAILED IT. I COULDN'T EVEN SING, BECAUSE I WAS SMILING SO MUCH. IT WAS THE BEST THING I'D EVER SEEN—THAT SOMETHING I HAD IMAGINED IN MY HEAD WAS NOW BEING HEARD ALOUD.

"The process of writing a song is a real physical thing for me. I feel this knot, like a kind of tightness in my chest, and I'll be in a bad mood until I get the song out."

Q: WHERE DID YOU TRAVEL TO FINISH THE RECORD, AND WHAT WAS THAT EXPERIENCE LIKE? I WENT TO ICELAND FIRST. I WAS THERE FOR TWO WEEKS WITH ALEX SOMERS, WHO HELPED PRODUCE ONE OF THE TRACKS FROM MY EP. WE DID THREE TRACKS TOGETHER THERE—SONGS THAT I HAD ALREADY WRITTEN—AND PRODUCED THEM FROM START TO FINISH.

A: IT WAS PROBABLY MY FAVORITE RECORDING EXPERIENCE EVER. IT WAS THE DEAD OF WINTER, AND THE SUN DIDN'T RISE UNTIL 11AM, AND IT SET AT ABOUT 3:30PM. I WOULD TRUDGE ACROSS TOWN EVERY DAY IN THE SNOW, ARRIVE AT ALEX'S, PUT ON MY STUDIO SLIPPERS, AND WALK AROUND. HE HAS THIS BIG, BEAUTIFUL WINDOW THAT LOOKS OUT OVER THE MAIN LAKE IN REYKJAVÍK. AND HE HAS THIS VIBRAPHONE THAT WAS ONCE OWNED BY THE ICELANDIC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, AND ALL OF THESE OTHER AMAZING INSTRUMENTS. A LOT OF THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC I'VE MADE IS PROGRAMMED, BUT EVERY INSTRUMENT YOU HEAR IN THOSE THREE SONGS—BITTER END, AEON, AND SOMETHING LIKE THIS—WAS PLAYED LIVE. WE ALSO HAD A DAY OF RECORDING STRINGS IN THE SUNDLAUGIN STUDIO, THE OLD POOL THAT SIGUR RÓS CONVERTED. IT WAS AMAZING.

FROM THERE, I WENT TO WISCONSIN. I HAD MET THIS GUY ZACH HANSON WHEN I WAS TOURING AT THE END OF LAST YEAR WITH THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH. NOT ZAC HANSON OF HANSON, BUT ANOTHER ZACH HANSON (LAUGHING), WHICH HAS CAUSED A LOT OF CONFUSION. I WAS CHATTING WITH HIM ABOUT THE FACT THAT I HAD THIS RECORD THAT WAS ALL OVER THE SHOP, AND I NEEDED A GOOD ENGINEER TO SIT WITH ME AND TIDY UP ALL THE LOOSE ENDS BEFORE WE GOT THE FINAL MIX DONE. HE SAID HE COULD DO IT, SO I WENT TO WISCONSIN TO WORK WITH HIM.

“When I opened the door and went out the next morning, the cat ran in, and I realized it had been outside all night. I thought, Oh my god. Imagine being the person who killed Bon Iver's cat. Luckily I didn't. It hissed at me all week.”

Q: YOUR LYRICS AREN'T AFRAID TO GO DEEP—ADDRESSING RELATIONSHIPS, LOSS, AND INNER CONFLICT. WHERE DO YOU THINK YOUR DESIRE TO WRITE ABOUT THOSE THEMES COMES FROM? WHEN I STARTED WRITING SONGS, THE LYRICS WEREN'T THAT GOOD, AND IT WAS BECAUSE I WASN'T WRITING ABOUT THINGS THAT I KNEW. THE DAY I THOUGHT THE LYRICS WERE IMPROVING, IT WAS BECAUSE I WAS WRITING ABOUT SOMETHING THAT HAD HAPPENED TO ME.

A: I HOPE THAT THROUGHOUT MY LIFE AND CAREER, I'LL BE ABLE TO EXPAND ON THE THEMES THAT I WRITE ABOUT. I THINK THAT PROBABLY COMES WITH AGE, AND MORE EXPERIENCE. BEING A 24 YEAR OLD, THE THINGS THAT HAVE INFLUENCED ME THE MOST HAVE BEEN MY CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS, LIKE THE ONES I HAD FROM LIVING IN A BOARDING SCHOOL. PEOPLE OFTEN IMMEDIATELY JUMP TO THE CONCLUSION THAT I'M WRITING ABOUT AN OLD BOYFRIEND, OR AN OLD CRUSH. SOMETIMES THAT'S THE CASE. BUT, I'VE ALWAYS FELT THAT WRITING ABOUT CONFLICT WITH A CLOSE FRIEND OR FAMILY IS SOMETHING THAT CAN BRING YOU MORE DEPTH.

HEAVEN I KNOW—THE FIRST THAT CAME OUT—IS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THAT. I WROTE THAT ABOUT MY OLDEST, CLOSEST FRIEND, WHO MOVED TO NEW YORK LAST YEAR. I FELT UNTETHERED, BECAUSE SHE HAD BEEN SUCH AN ENORMOUS PART OF MY LIFE. WE WERE WORKING OUT HOW TO HAVE THE SAME RELATIONSHIP OVER THE PHONE, BUT STRUGGLING TO FIND TIME TO TALK.

AT THE TIME, I WAS COMPLETING A TERM OF SCHOOL, AND WAS STAYING AT MY PARENTS HOUSE IN CANOWINDRA, BECAUSE I WAS PLACED IN THIS RURAL MEDICAL RESIDENCY. I WAS DRIVING AN HOUR EVERY DAY, BECAUSE I WAS ALSO GOING BACK AND FORTH TO SYDNEY AS WE WERE TOURING MY EP. I SPENT ABOUT 70 HOURS IN THE CAR THAT MONTH.

“The the things that have influenced me the most have been my close relationships.”

THE PROCESS OF WRITING A SONG IS A REAL PHYSICAL THING FOR ME. I FEEL THIS KNOT, LIKE A KIND OF TIGHTNESS IN MY CHEST, AND I'LL BE IN A BAD MOOD UNTIL I GET THE SONG OUT. SO I'LL SIT DOWN AT THE PIANO FOR A MINUTE, AND IF I CHURN OUT A SONG, I JUST FEEL LIGHTER—LIKE I HAVE LESS WEIGHING ON ME, PHYSICALLY. ITS AN IMMEDIATE RELEASE.

THAT'S THE IDEA BEHIND RESERVOIR. IT'S WHAT I CALL THAT INNER-MOST PLACE, WHERE YOU KEEP ALL THE THINGS THAT IF YOU THOUGHT ABOUT EVERY DAY, YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO GET OUT OF BED. IT'S NOT ALWAYS A NEGATIVE PLACE, SOMETIMES IT'S JUST YOUR MOST CONTEMPLATIVE STATE. BUT IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO WRITE A SONG NOW, I HAVE TO SIT IN THE RESERVOIR, AND REALLY LET IT ENVELOP ME. AND THEN I CAN MAKE SOMETHING THAT'S HONEST.

Q: DO YOU FEEL CREATIVELY SATISFIED?

A: I THINK I WILL WHEN I FINISH THIS BLOODY UNIVERSITY DEGREE! IT ROBBS ME OF TIME, AND FREEDOM. SO I REALLY HAVE TO GO FOR IT WHEN I FEEL INSPIRED—REALLY MILK AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL THAT IT'S WORTH WHEN THE MOMENT HITS—BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO JUST CASUALLY GO ABOUT SONGWRITING.

“It robs me of time, and freedom.”