

Julia

You're tuned into a kind of harmony. In this podcast, we're looking to transcend the physical limitations of daily life. In each episode, we speak with a different practitioner who uses sound as a tool or method for connection, Transcendence, and healing. We're your hosts, Julia E Dyck and Amanda Harvey.

Julia

In this episode, we spoke with Sarah Feldman. Sarah is a pop singer, songwriter and producer and a music education content creator. She holds a degree in Electrical acoustics and music composition from the University of Concordia. We were curious to speak with Sarah about her practice as a musician. We discussed her writing and production process, and her relationship with pop music.

Sarah

One of the things that my practice has been focusing on in terms of like, the emotional content that I'm drawing from, and like the life experiences that I'm drawing from is sort of like looking back on the experiences that I've had in my 20s, and trying to process them through my music, not like not all of it, I definitely also write songs about wanting to have sex with girls, or whatever goes on my mind. My 20s were like a tough journey. And I think that the way that I would characterize them, it was sort of like, working hard, putting a lot of energy into trying to get out of not a very good situation, both like externally and internally. And so I think that that time was like, it was about acting, and doing the things that I needed to do to like, solve problems. And I don't think that really left a lot of space for me to really deeply internalize, like, what happened. And I mean, and honestly, like, my childhood leading up to it as well, is just as much a part of it really. So I think like, yeah, being able to write music now is just like a really, it's a wonderful opportunity to, like, give myself a reason to really spend time with something that happened, or like a feeling that I have or like, pattern that I have or used to have. Because I think you know, as much as I'm processing those things, regardless of whether I'm making music or not, it's like one thing to maybe journal about it, and to think about it and talk to your friends about it. It's another thing to like, take that experience or that feeling or those thoughts and like, form it into something that you practice over and over again, I was like talking to my therapist about this last like session we had where I was like, oh, yeah, I wrote this song. And it was like, pretty depressing. And playing it over and over again, like practicing it made me just be like, I don't actually like believe a lot of the stuff I'm saying here, like, a lot of the lyrics were like, thoughts that I had had, while kind of just thinking about this problem that I'm like, still working through after singing it maybe like five times a day, for a period of time, I was like, Man, these feelings that I'm expressing are like real, and they come from like, a very genuine real place, like, doesn't feel like inauthentic. But I'm also like, this is not how I really see myself, you know. So I think that's one way that it could be or another way that it could be would be where it really does feel like it captures the nuance of like the feelings world. And you go to that place like every day and you refine your expression of it and you just hang out there in a way that you would just not really be compelled to if you were just like, I mean generally like when I'm like processing my feelings. I'm like, Okay, I had my time to think about that. And now it's time to like, continue to

live my life right to like, move on for the time being. I don't think it would be really ideal to like, be like, Okay, I'm going to spend the next two hours thinking about this thing, you know, and like,

Amanda

so music for you is a way to process

Sarah

at the time it is yeah, I don't think it necessarily always will be and I think that that would sort of really like boxed me in terms of like my expression. I mean, I guess maybe it's always kind of a form of processing, even if it's like about something like lighter. But like, I think if I'm feeling light, I want to be able to make music that is light, too, you know. So it's not, it's not always about that. But I think just given where I'm at in my life, and this time where I've sort of reached this new level of stability, and I'm like, looking back on all these experiences that's coming up through the process, like all the time.

Amanda

Can you talk a little bit about the process of creating songs or an album, as well as what you are currently working on?

Sarah

Yeah. Oh, man, there's like, so many different ways to sort of like think and talk about this. Great, yeah, I just need to, like, find a way in. So in terms of, maybe like, the overarching goals, I mean, I'm not I'm not really working on an album right now. Or like any sort of specific body of music, while I'm looking to develop a body of music, a sort of living body of music that's like constantly being refreshed, that I can perform and sort of draw from to probably really singles for a while, like, so my situation is that I'm actually fairly new to making pop music, my background is kind of more in electro acoustics and contemporary classical music. And in the last year or so I've sort of really made the switch to being like, oh, I want to make pop music. And this is really a sort of like the main focus of of my musical life that has come with like a really steep learning curve. I also am learning to sing. I mean, I guess I feel like I've I sing now, but it's still like an early thing in the process. And I've never really written lyrics before, also. So there's a lot of learning things for the first time happening right now. And basically, I'm like, looking to develop a skill set in terms of writing lyrics, like top lines, which is like the vocal melody and lyrics, and producing and songwriting, I want to be extremely good at all three of these things, like I want to be able to do them easily and at a world class level, basically. So in order to do that, it's really like, I try to obviously express myself as authentically as possible. And it's not like I care any less about the individual pieces of music that I make. But my primary goal is to develop, I think, like disposition is a really nice word, like a network of skills and abilities so that I can sit down and make a song in an afternoon that reaches these levels. And do it like easily, because that's kind of that is like how it works at the sort of highest levels, you know, like the top producers in pop music, you know, they'll work with an artist, and they'll pull together like a beat, and maybe three hours or something like that. And the artists will be writing the top line. And it's often the case that a lot of our favorite songs are written in the chorus of an afternoon. I

guess I'm trying to be able to do all those things, which is definitely ambitious. But there's lots of people who do that, you know, yeah, so I am writing music all the time, like writing new music all the time. So a huge part of my practice is really like writing a batch of music, sort of evaluating what it needs to grow and get better, and then writing another batch of music. And you know, so I'll maybe write four or five songs in a batch. And then we were talking about this before we started recording, like, I'll reach a point where I've sort of evolved beyond that work. And I'm kind of like, okay, I'm tired of this, I feel like I can do much better if I just write a bunch of new songs. So that's what I do. And I am just trying to accelerate that cycle. So this last cycle was a couple of months, which is way longer than I want it to be. But I'll sing for like three hours a day, so that I'm can get my vocal chops up relatively quickly. And learning how to write lyrics. For the first time. It's like, it just makes things go more slowly at the very beginning of these processes, but I'm hopeful that you know, within the next year or something like that, that cycle will be more like a week where I write four or five songs. And then the next week, I can also write four or five songs. Because I'm not like learning new things all at the same time. What I'm working on is kind of always changing. You know, like, in the next few weeks, I'm hoping to write four or five new songs, and I don't know if you guys will hear any of them maybe, hopefully, but I might just have to Right, four or five new ones again. So yeah, I think like, I want to get to a point where doing everything is just, it's easy. And I feel like super, super confident in sort of like every aspect of making and performing pop music to the point where it's just sort of automatic. You know, I

Amanda

got to ask, you're kind of creating songs in batches, like, what happens to the batch of songs that you grow tired of

Sarah

the gathered digital dust? Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, by the time I'm through the batch, I'm like, pretty over it. You know? Like, I mean, it's like, wonderful that you'd really hear it. Like, you'd be like, Wow, between, you know, this one and the last one that's like a leap, you know? So it's kind of like, it's like, well, what do I even want to do with that old stuff? Like, it's just, it's not me anymore. It just doesn't really feel like there's like stuff in there that I like, obviously, I mean, I made it. But I don't know, I just see it as a part of the process. And I mean, it's like, not abnormal at all, like a lot of artists will write 50 songs over the course of choosing 10 to put on an album like that's like not as like, not an abnormal, like, in fact, my sort of inspiration for working like, this has been finding out what the top people in the industry do and how they work and super common for people to have like a writing session, and be like, Oh, wow, we just wrote a hit today, you know, or be like, Okay, that one was pretty good. But like, it's not really standard. So it's a funny, it's a funny phenomenon. I mean, I've heard stuff where it's like, yeah, the song is like not getting released. And sometimes it's like amazing, like all your favorite artists make amazing music that you never hear. Yeah, it's really interesting.

Amanda

Does this kind of process that you've created differ between different mediums or different

bodies of work that you've made?

Sarah

I would say that like, one way that I could characterize this whole process is learning how to work like a professional like a top professional. And so it's evolved a lot, as I've tinkered with the process itself. And like, if what I've just said, are my priorities right now, they've evolved or like the way that I think I can do that has changed so much over the last year of just basically making music just on my own as a full time job effectively. So yeah, as I learn more, it changes as I figure out how to do the process better, it changes, like becoming less perfectionist, learning how to not spin out if I'm making something that I'm like, not sure about, there's all these kind of like, meta skills that I feel like I've been developing through the process too, right? Because it's like, it's so deeply personal, it's so personal to you, your own emotional baggage, all the things you bring with you to that process, right. And, you know, for me, my history is very much like intertwined within my creative practice, you know, when I was younger, and needed to kind of like check out of certain aspects of my life to kind of protect myself, I did that through making music. And that was a better coping mechanism than maybe other ones that I could have had. But I've had to learn how to do it now not as a coping mechanism, but something that I am choosing to do as like, an emotionally mature adult that is, like, grounded and like making conscious decisions about how I want to live my life and spend my time rather than doing it as this kind of automatic, like, learned self protection mechanism. So yeah, I used to be really hard for me to write because I would be like, it has to be amazing. And it wasn't, you know, like it would come out. And I'd be like, Oh, well, this isn't as good as the music that I love to listen to. So I'm terrible. And I just kind of spin out, you know, and so I've had to really, really work on myself both like internally, emotionally and also in terms of my practice in order to be able to, to be writing something and being like, I don't know if this is going to be my best work, but that's okay. Like, that's not actually like a threatening thing, right? Like, that's just a part of the process, right? Writing these batches of songs. Part of what it allows me to do is not have such an intense emotional attachment to the work or the way that that work reflects on me as a person, right? It's just like, well, this thing that I'm making, it came from me it has some kind of value, but I don't actually need to decide how much value it has, right now at all. That doesn't matter, right? Like, I am just planning, I'm just experiencing, I'm just doing whatever feels right. And I'm just, there's this seed of an idea. And I just, I am going to follow it. And I'll decide later whether it's good. And whether it's good or not. I mean, it may be disappointing if I write a bunch of songs in a row, or even, I mean, to be honest, one that I feel like is maybe not a keeper. But, you know, it's like, I've, I've had to learn how to just have a little bit more distance from it. And just to be like, Okay, well, yeah, that song was actually like, kind of cool in a certain way, you know, like, I see what was good about it. And then it's like, Great, I'm gonna make another one now, you know, and maybe that one I will want to share, maybe not, but like, it just doesn't matter right now, you know, like, about going there and doing it every day. And having a sort of like, longer term trust in myself, I think is like, something that I've tried to develop.

Amanda

It's really amazing to kind of like, hear the self work involved in your practice, as well, and how

there's lots of parallels between these two things, and just kind of like getting out of this mindset that it's like, everything has to be perfect. And instead, you're like, This is a part of the process. And totally, I also love this idea of like, having trust in yourself and your, your ability.

Sarah

Mm hmm. Yeah. I mean, I feel like I thank you. I feel like that is like such a huge part of it is being like, I'm not going to judge. I don't need to judge because I trust that whatever's in me will lead me somewhere good. Like,

Amanda

can we talk a little bit about your history? Could you speak to the album that you made? 10 years ago? Yeah. I didn't know the title of this album. So I can't reference it.

Sarah

I think it's just, it doesn't have a title. Well, yeah, this is an album that I made. The reason why it's like, I think so important to me still is because I forced myself as an exercise to just finish all of the pieces in two sittings, give or take. And at this time, my perfectionism was really raging, and really kept me from expressing myself. And I think like, looking back at that music, I feel like it is such an authentic representation of how I felt, and the person that I still am and was back then. So it's like, something that I'm extremely proud of, and like, grateful exists, because it's sort of like this little blip in a world of trying to write music all the time, and kind of not getting anywhere with it a lot of the time. Yeah, I mean, I don't really know how much I feel like really getting too much into the details. But I mean, basically, like, I'm trans. And I mean, that probably says, and, like if you know trans people, you know, it's like, we have to go through a lot to to become the people that we want to be in the world. It takes a lot of work. And the odds are kind of stacked against us. And I think, before we get to be the people that we want to be we have to deal with having to be people that we don't want to be. And I think we carry that with us as adults. And we have to Yeah, not only figure out how to become the people that we want to be, but then also figure out how to sort of unlearn all of these things, all this baggage that sort of came with having to cope with living as a version of yourself that is not authentic. And, yeah, we have to often disconnect from ourselves in ways and it has like massively far reaching effects, like every area of it's affected every area of my life, for sure. And I think most trans people would, would probably agree with me on that, or would share that sentiment.

Amanda

I was just wondering if you still feel a kind of connection to the themes that you're exploring on this album?

Sarah

Oh, yeah, totally. I mean, it's kind of like the same shit in a way. It's like about self repression, about loneliness, about desiring more and better and like a real kind of like, you know, I think there's a lot of love in that album that's like trying to get out and I feel like all those things are still true of the person that I am today, and it's just evolved into into this new version, but I think

emotionally? Yeah, it's like it's very similar sort of undercurrents?

Amanda

How do you feel about this album, as a kind of archive of your, your past?

Sarah

I mean, I feel wonderful about it, I feel so grateful. And I like love to listen to it. And I love to like, share it with people that that I care about. I haven't shared it with very many people. So it's pretty vulnerable. But yeah, I mean, I feel really grateful that it exists, it feels like, I think that one of the ways that I would characterize my youth is like, trying to reach out in some way, but not really being able to, you know, like being like, like, I can always trace back a part of me that's like, trying to have connection, trying to be seen, trying to be honest, trying to know myself, you know, and I think it's always just been really hard to do that. And I think sometimes the guard came down more than others. And I feel like this is like, an example where unknowingly my guard at the time really dropped. And I was able to sort of like, really show myself authentically, which was like, Yeah, extremely hard, like, basically, you know, practically never happened. So to be able to have that and be able to use that to reconnect to that version of myself and be like, okay, yeah, like, we've been through a lot, but we're kind of the same person. You know, like, that's such a gift. Like, I feel so lucky to have that. And the other thing, talking about, like, trusting in yourself, right, like, being able to listen to it and being like, Oh, this is beautiful. Now that I have the distance from it, where there's no need to judge it for its technical mastery, or lack thereof, or whatever, right? Like, I made it 10 years ago, I was like, 19 years old when I made it, right. Like, I was like a child, like how successful it could be on Spotify, or whatever, in the algorithm world, it has no relevance whatsoever. So when you sort of are able to peel that off, and just be like, Wow, there's so much like, heart and beauty and like brilliance in this music. And if I'm capable of channeling that spirit into that music, then clearly, I have something to give to the music that I'm making now.

Amanda

Let's talk a little bit about pop music. Yeah. What's your relationship? Like with pop music, both as a creator and a listener?

Sarah

I love this question so much. When I was in my mid teens, I was really into super, super academic music. Like, I think that I was always looking for, like, I'm very analytical person. And I have always been extremely curious about music and how it works. And I think that as a young person, you know, I was like in music lessons and stuff like that. But the level of kind of like analysis and understanding that I was looking for wasn't really available to me, like I was learning music theory and stuff like that. But I have this huge desire to just be like, I want to understand how music works. Like what makes it good. I want to know every little detail about it, you know, and I didn't really see a way of doing that. And then I started to discover this kind of more academic music at first. Yeah, I was getting into like early electronic music and like mid century 20th century contemporary classical music stuff. So I was like, getting into cage and

Stockhausen and tons of like early electronic music. And they're like these records that I talked about a lot. It's like the Scientology of early electronic music. And they had like bios and little write ups on every piece that was in, in these anthologies. So I bought the records and I would listen to the music and I've like read them and read about these people. And I was like totally just like I was so obsessed. I just loved it so much. And I was so inspired by it and I was like oh I want to be like these people like they're so smart and they have this analytical and like intellectual approach to making music and some time passed. And then I discovered electro acoustics this program at Concordia that I went to and that was like, it kind of clicked because I was like, Oh here is the way that I can be like these people. This is the skill set of analytical tools that I've been wanting so badly and not seen an avenue to sort of get. So I really, really like, especially in the first couple of years, I just loved electroacoustic so much. And I was like, You know what, I was also kind of an asshole about music, because I was like, Oh, if it's not intellectually stimulating in the way that I have learned to be stimulated through music, then it doesn't have any value to me. We're just like, a depressingly boring way of thinking about music. And, like, at this time, I was like, wrapped so tight as a person, you know, like this is before I started transitioning, and I feel like just as life went on, it just kind of got harder and harder to sort of, like, deal with this dissonance of like, who I was, and like the person that I was presenting to the world. So I was just kind of like, I wouldn't have necessarily characterize myself this way at the time, but I was a bit miserable, you know. It was hard for me to let go and have fun and be spontaneous. And eventually, well, then I started transitioning, and I was probably like, two or three years into it, I started, there was like a moment for me, where I really started to kind of like, get in touch with this other part of myself that was like, could have fun and was not too worried about things and relaxed and could be present and could just enjoy life as it was. And that kind of coincided with me discovering Pop music. It's like I had like people in my life who were like showing me pop music. Sophie was like a huge intro to it. And I mean, her stuff is like, obviously super crazy and was definitely satisfying to my boot brain or whatever. But also it was like listening to Rosalia and Frank Ocean. And I think those are like the three albums like blonde and Rosalia's first album and Sophie's like last album, I was listening to a lot and like 2018. And I was like, it was kind of the beginning of this process. I mean, I feel like you can really track it of just sort of being like, oh, yeah, this just feels really good. And I don't have to judge it, I can just go towards it. And I just, I know that it's not hurting me or anyone else. And it just feels good. So I'm just going to go towards it. I'm just gonna enjoy it. And I think it was kind of like, oh, okay, that seemed like it was that was safe. That was okay, like I could do that. Like, maybe I could know, a little bit further. And over the last three, four years, I would say that that process has just sort of continued, and I've just sort of continued to pull away these like layers of judgment of like, what music should be and begun to really just orient myself towards pleasure and what feels good. I think that music should feel good, or it should feel like something it should like feeling is what's happening here. Not so much thinking is possible. And it's. And it's great. And I think I've also learned that pop music can, you can take that same kind of analytical mindset to pop music, it's just the rules are just different. But it's a set of rules just as much as the beep music B is a set of rules. Right? Like even though it might purport to be more, you know, like it's more deconstructed or, or whatever. But I think any kind of tradition has its own set of boundaries. And I don't think the fact that there are boundaries is a problem. I think the

problem is trying to pretend that there aren't boundaries, and then holding that above other music. Like I think limitations are like an essential aspect of creativity. Like nothing happens without limitations, like the creative possibilities from like, one millisecond to the next are incontestable, right. And we have to find a way through the infinite amount of possibilities, like our brains are not built to make sense of anything that's that vast, right? We need to have a whole bunch of things that we're already deciding, we're not going to do in order to make something to make something at all, and especially make something that communicates to other people in some kind of meaningful way. So yeah, I think for me, discovering pop music was really like letting go of those pretensions but more importantly, just learning how to, to not put like a value judgment on what felt good, like just being like, well, I love this. This makes me feel so happy. It makes me want to dance. It makes me smile. It makes me feel sad. You know, it just makes me feel whatever it does, and that's like a gift and it doesn't need to be anything more than that.

Amanda

But from what you've expressed, like, I feel like pop music, in some ways has like offered you or showing you like, how to engage with the pursuit of pleasure.

Sarah

Absolutely, there's no way that I could be the person that I am today without. I mean, I guess if I had never discovered pop music, it would have just been something else, maybe, you know, but pop music and my learning my intense love for it has been totally at the center of being able to be the person that I am now, you know?

Amanda

Can I ask you like, what your favorite pop albums are right now that you're like,

Sarah

Oh, my God. I mean, so I go through a lot of music really quickly, like I kind of the way that I've been listening for the last couple of months is basically I just, like, make playlists of like albums that I find, and I just put that. So it's like the November playlist and now I'm on to the December playlist. I basically just shuffle it whenever I want to listen to music, and it's like, whatever I just thought maybe would be interesting. comes up. So it's kind of like the playlists get really long. Like they're like, hours hours long. Which is like kind not ideal, because sometimes there's stuff that I'm like, I'll go back and I'll be like, Oh, fuck, that album was amazing. And I really only listened to it like a few times because it was like, in this mush of just like so much stuff. And usually it's like stuff that I usually like most of it. But you know, the stuff that really really impacts me is like a small percentage usually. I've been really loving everything but the girl that's been a new one my friend Destiny showed me that band and the singers like insane her voice is just so nuanced and like, just incredible, like an insane voice. And not a showy voice like not a diva, you know, like, if she's not like being like, Look at me. I'm a good singer. You know? Like, there's like this Robin album from the 90s I don't remember what it's called. But it's kind of more r&b. I couldn't believe it. Like I love her music and I'd never heard this album before. And when I when



I first heard the music, I would never in a million years would have thought it was her. Like I was like oh this is just like a fucking banging r&b album. And then I was like this is Robin and it's like the way she sings is different to like her vows are all like r&b. Yeah, so and stuff I feel like I'm also like it's a funny thing is because I didn't grow up listening to pop music and I didn't spend a lot of time in my 20s Listening to pop music. I'm like catching up on stuff that a lot of people have spent a lot of time listening to you know

Amanda

where can we find you online?

Sarah

Well, yeah, so at the moment of recording I don't have any music out I think in January February March I'll start releasing music and then once I start releasing it I think it will be like pretty regularly but for now I'm Sarah underscore Feldman underscore on Instagram. So that's the best way to keep up with what I'm doing.

Julia

Sara's piece is titled 10 years Remix.

Julia

A kind of harmony is hosted and produced by Julia E Dyck and Amanda Harvey with generous support from the Canada Council for the Arts. This episode was edited by our production assistant Laura Dickens with mixing and mastering by Evan Vincent, project management by Christian Scott graphic design by mutual design.

Julia

A huge thanks to all of our contributors for their generous involvement in this project. If you'd like to support this project and what we do, please follow us on Instagram or subscribe to our Patreon