

# Empathetic Connections: an interview with songwriter Mieka Pauley

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Union Board puts on a lot of great events, but one that I look forward to each and every time is the Hawks Coffeehouses where we can enjoy the performance of known and unknown artists from IIT and from all around in the backdrop of the evening-educed snugness that rests on the MTTC Welcome Center and free coffee and snacks; that's always a plus. The last performance I had the pleasure of seeing featured singer-songwriter Mieka Pauley, who I also had the esteemed privilege to interview after her fantastic show that Tuesday night

Pauley has the distinction of having won the title of Cosmopolitan's Fun Fearless Female Rock Star of the Year as well as dominating such competitions as the Starbucks Songwriter Competition and New York Songwriters Circle Songwriting Contest and having been featured on such programs as PRI's "Mountain Stage," which I recommend everyone look up on and listen to get the 'full Pauley experience,' which is, I'd say, a very real and personal one.

Her set list for that night had her performing a number of her own songs including "All The Same Mistakes," "Marked Man," "Never Fuck a Woman You Don't Know," and "Run," as well as a couple of covers including Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" and the traditional folk/blues song famously covered by Nirvana on their Unplugged album, "In The Pines."

In response to me asking about whether she related to Nirvana front man personal Kirk Cobain's critical lyrical style, she responded fidgeting anxiously with the wrapper on her bottle of water, "I do feel like I'm pulling on that same feeling of isolation, though Cobain was a lot more messed up than me." She comments on the fact that many of her songs deal with recognition of the mistakes that she has made in a similar vein to the confiction that Cobain felt with his fame. Her real attraction to the song in question, which she would more readily attribute to the folk/blues musician Led Belly, was its atmosphere: "There is something so creepy about it, the song. The girl...is probably going to be murdered."

My interview began with me asking her how she would define her sound given the caveat that it had to be a genre she made up for herself. She at first had expressed some difficulty at this as she has been so used to classifying her music on the well-trodden grounds of main genres. "People want to know what to expect," she explains. After 10 years, she has tended to fall into her indie-pop roots for the sake of simplicity. After some serious consideration though, she said that she would describe her music as "art-writery folk alt-rock," and as someone that is totally on-board with making up words and phrases as a means of demonstrating one's personal freedom of mind, I was content with this answer.

As for her music, Pauley writes from

the heart, and, as she herself admits, her heart tends towards the critical and depressing. "It's a lot easier for me to write hopeless songs even when I'm in a happy place." With songs like "He'll Never Quite Love Me Enough," "We're All Gonna Die," and "All The Same Mistakes," it's a claim difficult to refute. As she divulges: "I'm looking for that empathetic connection, I've tried to write happier songs but there's something missing in my own delivery, in my presentation. I can't deliver happy and have that empathetic connection."

That concept of empathy is definitely a major player in the songwriting of many 'indie' artists and definitely one I share with her in striving for with most of what I do. During her concert, in the downtime between songs when artists usually talk to their audience in a very casual way, she felt compelled to ask one of the students in the front row if he was drawing sketches on his notepad. Whatever that could possibly say about her personality and her character, whether it is that she is naturally curious or enjoys conversing with people similarly artistically minded or is maybe just a tad bit nosy, I like it.

Being an avid listener and practicer of music, I think that there are often hidden influences in artists based on what they listen to even if what they listen to is no where near the kind of music they make. John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats, a band which is not at all known for its brutal energy, famously listens to almost exclusively Death Metal, and I find that sort of reveal very telling to the frame through which a musician may be looking in the composition of their own music, like how a popular musician may listen to classical music and treat their song writing process similarly to a classical composer.

Instead of surprising me with listening to the most niche genre imaginable, she voiced something common with seasoned artists as herself, saying "The more I listen to music, the less I listen for my own enjoyment." Now that I think of it, perhaps a musician's interest in genres that are not their own may be something of a coping mechanism to deal with that constant analysis that keeps musicians from fully enjoying other's music.

She did express interest in looking at the sort of science of our enjoyment of music and cracking why some songs can be so enjoyable. "Songs I've been trying to figure out why they're so catchy-I listen to them and try to enjoy them in a professional way: Ryn Weaver's "Octahate" - I'm gonna dissect that shit and write another one, Gautier's "Somebody That I Used to Know," Sia's "Chandelier," Hoiser's "Take Me To Church," I'm gonna dissect all of those so you just wait; the next time I come to Chicago, I'm gonna have the best songs."

Pauley does elaborate that instead of from other music, she gets most of her inspiration from books, explaining, "In my car I listen to a lot of audiobooks," ascribing a great deal of importance to the "phrasing" of words in literature. This interest in phrasing is a factor

of her vocal style I definitely picked up on during her performance. I told her that something that I think she shared with folk artists like Bob Dylan was mindfulness about her lyrical flow and rhythm, which could be heard particularly her song "Run."

To this, she responds that it was interesting that I bring up Bob Dylan in the first place because, as she explained, there is something innate to Bob Dylan that does not work with her vocal style: "I cannot cover Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell." I remarked how similar it was to the emphasis of the artist's 'unique' personality of rappers, Hip Hop being something I think of as being a folk music in its purest sense.

With this, I couldn't help but see how she felt about a music culture theory I have been forming for a while detailing my distinction between the motivation for writing music as existing on a spectrum, the extremes of which I refer to as folk motivations and classical motivations. Folk artists in this theory tend to focus on the artists who writes the music and/or performs this music whereas flassical artists focuses on the music and illuminating something akin to an objective truth or grand concept, and from this follows many of the characteristics and 'problems' recognizable in much of music.

To this, Pauley responded favorably, agreeing and open to expanding it, adding another dimension to this spectrum which would make the distinction between the personal and the group consciousness with regards to music. It was an idea which I had, to be honest, been toying with myself. We both agreed that she sits on the folk end hedging strongly towards the individual level, which fits perfectly in line with the similarities I drew between her and hip-hop artists, which resist perfect covers. Particular about Bob Dylan, Pauley complains, "I don't like hearing other folk musicians with Bob Dylan's delivery and accent, it's just so awkward; that's his, get your own." That is a truer summary of folk music than I could ever come up with myself.

Enough about my stupid theories though, what kind of interview would this be without getting to know the path that brought Pauley to her current state of success? When I inquired of her musical beginnings, she tells me that as a youth, her training in music was limited to studying classical piano, which led her to attempt to write classical piano pieces of her own at a young age, albeit classical from a kid's perspective. She explained how she used to give her compositions names in other languages not realizing that classical songs were named in different languages because those were the composers' languages of origin.

Apart from that, most of her musical prowess was self-taught, besides a few vocal lessons she did take in her formative years, and even those were of little consequence to her now besides having helped her with breath control and placement to some extent. She says this because earlier in her career, she ended up

getting a condition called vocal fold nodules (which, if you don't know, is a swelling tissue growth on vocal chords that manifests in the reduction of one's vocal abilities), which she reassures me most singers in popular music gets to some extent, but had caused her classical vocal training as a soprano to become almost completely nullified. Her instrument of choice though, the guitar, was self-taught.

As she grew older, she started writing bad pop songs, but she wrote them more so she would have something to sing, not thinking too fully about the complexity of their composition or anything like that. It wasn't until high school when she started writing for the sake of writing, but even then she could hardly say she had found her voice. Still, those years in high school were when she started cutting her teeth as a performer in clubs and coffee houses and where she got her true passion for the art.

In college, she started street performing and started focusing on writing and preforming for herself instead of as a member of one of fifteen bands on any particular night doing a gig. When she graduated, she saw that she could actually make enough money street performing to do it full-time.

She takes a pride in being where she is today having never studied music above those piano lessons, saying that it kept her from being jaded. Above all, she expressed interest in trying to find music in all the business, and given that most of her major releases, chiefly her 2012 LP "The Science of Making Choices," were done independently, one would think that business proficiency plays no small part in her work.

After 30 minutes or so of chatting, we had to start wrapping up, so I finished off by asking her what she had planned the future of her music career, particularly if she was working on or planning to record any new albums anytime soon. She told me that it has been hard to write lately and that she has had writers block for about four years now. "I've been trying to figure out a bunch of different ways to write. I might be getting closer; a lot of writers block is anxiety, so the closer I get to writing it the more I panic." It seems the same propensity for anxiety and unrest which she expresses so well in her music was actually keeping her from writing; I love it.

I'd like to thank Mieka Pauley for the interview and I want to encourage anyone interested to keep up with her releases and tour dates by go to her website where you can find links to take you to where you could purchase tickets to her May 1 show happening at Uncommon Ground in Chicago.

Also, for a good evening of music, check out all future Hawks Coffeehouse events. The next one is planned for Tuesday, April 7, (the day this newspaper drops) at 7pm in the MTCC Welcome Center and will feature IIT student and fellow TechNews contributor TJ Ayodele and it sounds awesome. Hope to see you all there.

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