Mitski Email Interview
April 30, 2017

Hi Julian!

First off, thank you for agreeing to email. I know a face-to-face / phone convo is preferred, but as I'm sure you know from touring yourself, it's hard to plan for free time and privacy on the road, and it's easier for me to just respond on email whenever I find time rather than try to schedule a phone call.

As I was reading your email, for some reason the Yeah Yeah Yeah's "Maps" was playing in my head, and it occurred to me that Karen O is half-Korean, but her half-Asian-ness was never brought up or talked about during the band's press cycles, or at least not that I remember from being a kid listening to them. I don't know what that means, it just occurred to me.

I was also talking with my friend Emily Yoshida yesterday, she's a film maker and critic, and we talked about how with every "ethnic" main character in TV and film there *has* to be some elaborate sequence / dialogue that explains their exact heritage, where they come from, why exactly we're watching them. POC characters need an explanation to be in the movie, they cannot simply exist. I thought of that as I read your questions regarding my various interviews and articles explaining how much I'm an "outsider." People need a justification for hearing my voice and seeing my face.

On to the questions. These answers are really long - I don't think I've ever written so much about myself in one email - so sorry for the length in advance.

Do you remember specific moments of what the "Asian-American" experience is to you? Where do you feel you fit in (or not) amongst the pan-Asian-American community in the US?

The thing is, I've realized I never thought of myself as "Asian American". That's a term only really used in America, and I didn't grow up here. So my "Asian American" experience is mostly about being told over and over that I'm Asian American, and feeling like someone is calling me by a name that I don't recognize, kind of like hearing people yell out "Emily! Emily!" and turning around after a while to discover they're calling to me, but my name has never been Emily.

There's also been a hesitation to name myself that because I'm Japanese, and I was raised mostly in the East where Japan was in many countries the oppressor and colonizer, and was always made aware of that. So there was a great amount of confusion and guilt, I think, when I got to the U.S. and was lumped in the same minority group of people that my people have historically oppressed.

So I think my acceptance of being "Asian American" started recently, in my 20's, as I've gradually connected with other artists who are also called Asian American, and have come to treasure our friendships and feel connected through our shared experiences here in the U.S. I really need other Asian artists in my life, more than I thought I would, since I never really had friends growing up, or ever. It's become important for me to have these people to just talk with, and on a practical level to give and receive advise or leads for jobs/gigs. I've slowly started to identify with the term "Asian American," not because the world around me is calling me that, but because I've come to strongly identify and feel most comfortable with other people who are called that.

What music did your mom and dad listen to respectively?

My mother was never really a music-listener, but she would hum or sing to herself often, and I found out later in life that she was singing Japanese songs of her youth - Japanese Pop songs of the late 70's-early 80's. She mostly sung songs by female singer-songwriters Yumi Matsutoya and Miyuki Nakajima, who I actually find my own songs sound a lot like! So I think a lot of my songwriting is subconsciously but greatly influenced by those two artists.

My father was something of an amateur ethnomusicologist. His specialties were the local/ traditional music of Latin America (especially Cuba), Irish/Scottish/American Appalachian folk music, and Tibetan and Mongolian traditional music, including throat singing. This sounds really pretentious, but he just genuinely liked that music, so that's what was playing in our homes all the time, and that's what I'm familiar with.

and what part of Japan is your family from, this is a very important distinction?
What does Japan mean to you?
How's your Japanese?
What is your relationship to the Japanese American community?

My mother is Japanese, and her mother's family is from Mie prefecture, on the west of Japan. I never met anyone from my grandfather's side, who is from Nagano prefecture, up north where winters are harsh, and it snows so much that houses have extra doors on the second floor so that people can go in and out when the snow buries the first floor. I'm closest with my grandmother's side of the family, more than anyone from my father's Anglo-American side (I say "Anglo-American" because it's both American and British.)

Mie prefecture is where Ise Shrine is - the shrine considered most sacred and important to Shintoism (the national animist religion of Japan) - and the water is known to be very clean in the area, because the water that goes through a shrine has to be pristine. Being from the place where that shrine is was quite important to me growing up. It made me feel close to something old and traditional, as someone who was always the new foreigner.

My grandmother's side of the family is important to me, especially because I lived with my grandmother for a while, and when we lived in the greater Asia region, we'd go back to my grandmother's side almost every summer. She lives in the countryside, and her house is surrounded by rice paddies. When I went to school there, I walked 30 minutes by endless fields and old traditional houses to get to school (no school buses like in the U.S.).

I went to a country school in Japan, so I was actually the "white girl" in school, and people would stare at me when we'd go grocery shopping, or people would just generally not know how to act around me. This was a theme throughout my upbringing - in China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and a lot of other countries, I was always the "white kid"! So it was very strange to come to the U.S. and be told I'm not white, haha.

Anyway, I went to Japanese school until 6th grade, and Japanese was my first language. There are Japanese schools worldwide, so even when I wasn't in Japan, I got Japanese schooling. I knew a little bit of English through my father, but my father was never very talkative or affectionate, so I really only spoke the basics. I was switched into English-speaking school systems in 7th grade, and that was tough, not just because of the language barrier, but for the fundamental East/West cultural differences. For example, in Japan the teacher is a really respected figure (you call people "teacher" even when they're not teachers, when they've accomplished a lot or got to a respected place in society) and I couldn't get used to students talking to teachers like they're friends. And in Japanese school there aren't any janitors, there's "cleaning time" right after lunch, where all the students clean respective parts of the school. The idea is that you clean what you use. That does not happen in English-speaking schools.

My grandmother has something like 7 siblings, I haven't met them all but I grew up around 3 of them. I grew up hearing stories about living through the war with the U.S., which felt very strange. Whenever people in the U.S. talk about how the atom bombs dropped on Japan were a "necessary evil", I want to say there is nothing that could justify evil like what my family lived through.

How was it going back to gig?

I had never been in Japan as a musician or even as an adult before, so it felt like a strange homecoming, especially since I hadn't gone back to Japan for 10 years prior. I felt like I'd gone overseas as a sort of Rumspringa, and went home 10 years later like "look at what I've made of myself!" Of course, there wasn't a welcoming committee or anything.

Aside from "Your Best American Girl," where else does your hyphenated-identity emerge in your work?

I think it has ultimately *become* my work, in a way. This is not to say I'm always literally talking about my hyphenated-identity, but because my hyphenated-identity has made me a life-long

outsider looking in, this perspective is in my work no matter what. I think it has actually been valuable to my eye for metaphor and description as a writer. I think the thing about having our unique sets of identities and growing up obviously different from everyone else, is that you learn to be objective even about yourself, and to be able to see and observe yourself how others see you, which many people never learn how to do. You develop a clinical eye for observing even your most intimate and private moments, and this comes in handy when trying to describe these moments in your writing.

have you always been able to see your own face in the movies you imagine playing along with your songs?

It took me longer than it should have to even start pursuing art-making as a career, because I genuinely could not imagine my face being out there, performing on stage, being an artist.

I wanted to make music by the time I was 15, and I was always the best in my school when it came to singing and music, but it didn't actually occur to me that I should then pursue my own art as something serious, until I turned about 18. Even then, I only really buckled down to make art for a living, because I realized I'd spent all my years in school being obsessed with music, that I hadn't learned any other skill or developed any other passion. So it didn't feel like a choice, it felt more like - I couldn't imagine how I was going to make it happen for myself, but I knew I had to, and I felt I had nothing else. I have always felt that I would have started pursuing music as a career by at least age 15 or 16 if I had been a cute white girl.

"Your music and presence in the music industry offers such catharsis and hope to me as a Japanese American woman and I'm so grateful to see and be able to support someone who is closer to me than most others in the overwhelming whiteness of indie music. As a woman of color, I think a lot about community care and how it is so important to build networks of support and take care of/look out for each other as a form of resistance. I feel like this becomes more important when you're someone, like yourself, who writes what seems like intensely personal music because people start to feel entitled to your time and energy and body and you are expected to be a symbol for a whole community of people and experiences. Do you feel that you are able to build these networks of support with other women of color (or just other marginalized folks in general) in the music scene? What are your practices of self/community care that sustain you and set boundaries (or do you have another way to think about this)?"

I have always naturally been a solitary person, and this was compounded by my a) being multi-racial and b) moving to a different country every other year of my upbringing. I say my solitude was compounded by my upbringing, but not caused by it, because I have a little sister who has essentially done the opposite of what I have in order to cope with our circumstances. She has instead become a very community-oriented people-person, who intensely seeks out friendships and communities wherever she goes, and she's just graduated from university with a degree in politics and international relations.

What I'm trying to say is, I don't feel I have a community in the way that most people define it. When I first came to New York, I was part of the DIY Punk scene for a while, but found that joining a community that already had its own cultural history and social order, as someone who is as different as I am, was incredibly difficult. I always felt I was doing the wrong thing, or I couldn't adjust to how the community ran itself, and eventually became isolated. I discovered that as long as I tried to join a pre-existing group, I would always feel like an outsider.

So the community I've slowly built for myself has instead been more personalized. They are a network of people I feel I can turn to, and who I care for in return, but most of them don't know each other. Each relationship is tailored to itself, and not bound to the rules within other relationships. All of these people are in the Arts in some way, as I've slowly been finding that those are ultimately the people I relate to most, and they are all either people of color or queer.

I may be optimistic, but I truly do think that the people who are drawn to me are also drawn to this private, personalized, and perhaps sparse approach to community. That is, I think the people who try to make me a symbol for a whole group are often people who are completely outside of these groups, like white journalists who need to write a think piece, or industry people who need to categorize me in some way. I find from being on social media and meeting people at my shows, that most people who are drawn to my art in some way are also coming to me very personally, almost privately, and they are often people who normally wouldn't go to indie rock shows at all, but decided to come to mine. I think that may be a unique feeling of safety that I bring to my shows and my online "community." Not the safety of being in a group, but rather the safety of being alone among others; no one needs to be friends, or be on the good or bad side of anyone, or needs to fit into a group. People who are at my shows can be there to experience something private.

But again, I may just be optimistic, and I understand this approach to community limits me when it comes to organizing and political action. I like to think that there are many ways to resist, or rather there are many roles to fill in the resistance, and I've concluded that I should focus on what I'm good at, rather than try to fill a role that isn't mine. I guess I hope that I can be a corner of the world people can turn to when they're tired from fighting out there. This is also a sort-of answer to your Trump question, that you asked after this one.

You have a monster tour schedule. I've been heartened by reading you're aiming to live healthy on the road (that took me too long to figure out). How are you doing?

I think the key to my physical and mental health on tour is for me to treat tour life like regular life. I think that a lot of my exhaustion from tour came from the mentality that tour is a special period of time that's separate from my "real" "normal" life, as though it almost didn't count as part of my life. But when I began touring 9 months out of the year, I realized I could no longer treat the majority of my life as "not real". So it's not even that I try to be uber healthy, it's more

that I try to regulate as much of my life on tour as I can, and I don't treat it as some sort of vacation from the real world. I don't drink at shows, because I wouldn't get to work and crack a beer if I had a "normal" job. I try to work in little moments for me to exercise, because if I didn't I would simply not exercise at all. That sort of thing.

*****

Best,
Mitski

Japanese Breakfast / Michelle Zauner
December 17th, Providence, RI.
Columbus Theater.

Michelle: I'm half Korean.

Yeah, it's so funny. I think it's really interesting… I think that there's a shift and I feel it especially in the last couple of years because I've been playing music for over 10 years, usually fronting bands. This is the first project that has been a solo project, that I've been like the sole face of. So, I think that that plays a part of it. I think the political landscape has something to do with it. For instance, i don't think anyone has referred to me as person of color until this year or the year before.

J: And what do you attribute that to?

M: I have a number of theories. One is I think that our generation is, like, hyper-educated and over qualified. I feel like our generation was really, really pushed into college by our parents who possibly—and I might just be projecting my entire experience onto everyone but like—my parents were of the baby boomer generation and I feel like they were kind of like raised with this mentality that if you work really hard and have a skill or a craft, then you will be successful. And maybe they got into a lot of jobs that they didn't find complete satisfaction with, so, I felt like our generation was really pushed into colleges because if you got an education then, you could pursue, maybe, something you wanted to pursue. Yeah, I don't know how true that is or not.

I don't know if liberal arts colleges were always so well attended or something, and I think that the curriculum at a lot of liberal arts colleges incorporates more things like Asian American Studies, or African American Studies. Maybe part of that gave us this new language to use when we went out into the world and we were more aware of how these social conditions affect the way that we treat other people. And there's like more of a sense of social responsibility and I'm sure a lot of it has to do with the internet and people finally being able to speak up about the injustice that they've experienced and create some kind of online community

I don't know what it is. For me personally, I think part of it is that landscape change and maybe because this was my project and I was at the forefront of it and also, maybe just the band name is part of it and that the album cover is a photo of my mother and she's Asian looking. I think the combination of those factors was maybe why it was more talked about in that way.

And I don't know. It's like I feel like I welcome it and I'm really happy and it feels so great, because you know, granted this is the most successful project I've been in, I was in another touring band called Little Big League for three to four years and I *never* had any Asian American kids come up to me and thank me for doing what I do or reach out to me online. I think part of that was the genre of music I was a part of was super white. We got really weirdly looped into this emo scene which is a very white community.

J: Ok, so what genre are you now?

M: I dunno. I think it's more broad, you know. I think the music that I make is way more accessible. It's like a pop project. I do things sonically to support a melody and the structures are a lot more simple. I think it's just more accessible in that way.

I really welcome and love to see a lot of young Asian American kids come up to me after shows and really thank me for representing me in some way. And I feel like that encourages them to also pursue the arts.

In the same breath, it is kind of a double edged sword because I don't know how much of my music is influenced by my Asianess. I think that it was part of my identity that I rejected for a really long time and after my mother passed away, it became a really integral part of my identity and I felt like I was reaching out to it so much more than I ever had.

Do I incorporate traditional Asian American instruments into my music? Absolutely not. Do I have an Korean language or specific references to my Asian American identity, I don't think so. Little things here or there, but, it's definitely not at the forefront.

J: There's not a larger Asian American political drive behind the music?

M: No, I don't think so… I started getting asked that question a lot in interviews and it's sort of like being a woman in music, you know, at a certain point, you just get really exhausted that people are even asking you this question—it's ok to ask me about how does gender influence your music if I felt like men were getting asked that question too, cause I think that I write largely about personal relationships and a lot of the time that has to do with people's identity and sometimes that has to do with gender and the way that we interact with the world. I think that men do that too and it's surprising that they aren't asked the same kind of questions. So, in the same breath, it's like, I appreciate you have an interest in my heritage and you're asking me this questions, but I know if I was white, you'd never ask me about my, like, English, like, Irish heritage and how that influences my music. It's an easy question to just say, "no."

J: Let's talk about, if you want, that "rejection," because I went through a very similar thing growing up. I'm from Nashville originally. Dad's white. Mom's from Saigon and I knew no Asian kids except for Lily whose Mom ran the Chinese food store my mom went to to make Vietnamese food. Whiteness and issues like that, and my Asianess wasn't even something I was able to comprehend. I didn't go to a liberal arts school… so, ethnic studies was not a thing for me. So, it's really only been the last five, six years for me to take apart a lot of this stuff, so I'm curious, because you said the word "rejection." That's a word I highly identify with, especially with being a halfsie growing up in a more rural southern place.

M: Totally. I grew up in Eugene, OR and the population is 98% white. I think one thing I really desired was this feeling of being a neutral body… There's a couple things. One was, I think that when you're young, anything that feels different about you is a scab and it's such a huge source of shame because you want so badly to fit in with everyone and that desire is at its peak in adolescence…
I never just felt neutral. If someone was attracted to me, I had to have this suspicion that it was because I was Asian and do they have yellow fever and if they weren't (attracted to me) is it *because I'm Asian*. You know what I mean?

J: (chuckling) Yeah, I know.

M: There's this neurosis that exists in you when you feel different from everyone… Especially to be half Asian or like to be half any race, there's this constant feeling of not belonging anywhere. If I go to Korea, everyone knows that I'm not full Korean. If I'm here, everyone just thinks I am an Asian person. So, it's hard to feel like you belong anywhere and I think I was just so angry at that and I hate, and I never had any Asian friends and if anything, I felt that maybe I did certain things to go out of my way to reject that part of my identity and to have people associate me with someone who is not Asian. You know what I mean?

I think one thing that's really interesting—I don't think too deeply into this—I think that I started being really interested in getting tattoos because instead of just being like that Asian girl at the party, it's like I had this control over what I looked like and my body, to be like, "oh, she's the person with the tattoos." I had the opportunity to be that person instead of just like the Asian girl, whatever. And I think there are a lot of Asian people that like have become interested in this because it's something that's not usually associated with Asian bodies in a way. I mean historically with Japanese tattooing and all that, but…

J: Yeah, you're not in the Yakuza.

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah! Or just like this docile or goody goody personality/stereotype, I think I really rejected and maybe like am a louder, more domineering person because of it.

J: Talk to me about your video.

M: Well, there are a couple videos. One was set in Flushing and I think there was this real celebration, and like I said, after my mom passed away, I felt so connected to her with my Asianess that this thing that I had been rejecting my whole life, all of a sudden, I wanted to be so close to it. So, I think that I set the video in Flushing because I have a great time when I'm in Flushing.

J: The one where you're dressed up?

M: The one where I'm dressed up was kind of like a commentary for a couple of reasons. I think that one, my band name is very sensitive for a couple of reasons, um, because it's misleading. Which I think that I thought was funny when I came up with it, you know. It's kind of irritating to have to explain and I'm very, very vocal about being half-Korean, but I do understand that there are people who can interpret it in a different way and be offended and feel like I misled them.

J: Who's offended?

M: Well, I think that people are confused. I've had a half-Japanese girl be very upset and kind of come at me about it. I think that it's a misinterpretation, or it's her interpretation that I don't identify with. It's not accurate.

J: I think given the respective histories (between Korea and Japan).

M: Exactly! I know! Exactly! I think that, obviously, cultural appropriation is a really hot topic and I think that it is problematic when it's a person in a position of power that is doing the cultural appropriation. Historically, I don't feel like that's what I am a part of, because my grandmother was a child during the Japanese occupation and was forced to forget her language and given a Japanese name and there's a really painful history there.

J: That's fucked up.

M: Yeah, and even as a child, the Korean hate the Japanese, still.

J: Yeah, my mom hates the Japanese. I think everyone…

M: Everyone in Asia hates the Japanese! (laughs)

J: They all hate each other. It's just so funny when you come to America and there's this pan-Asian identity, right, we're Asian American. Especially if white people see us they think we're probably brother and sister.

M: Mhmm, mhmm, mhmm.

J: Even though we're from very many miles apart, or, our mother's are. So, I find that interesting.

But yeah, the band name, the video…

M: I made the video after this girl reached out to me, very upset. I exchanged a few emails with her.

J: Someone you knew?

M: Someone I didn't know. It was really hurtful and scary because I am really sensitive to that and I really value that culture of calling people out and being PC because I think that it really opened up a space for me to be able to do what I do in a way that I never have been able to do before. Because I do think it's really important to people now that we listen to a variety of marginalized voices and in a way, maybe that helped carve a space for an artist like me. Because when I was growing up either, I didn't feel like I ever saw that. So I feel like I made that because I never tried to mislead anyone and I always tried to be very vocal about my heritage. **If anything, it's more embarrassing for me as a Korean woman because it worried me that (the band name) upsets Korean people. That I'm being insensitive to our history.**

You know how it is. You grow up your whole life getting asked, "what are you?" That it feels very private and it feels like a source of power to not reveal it and I think that I liked this name that was kind of playful and that kind of winked that I had some kind of east Asian identity without revealing like, this is my race. I also always felt that Japanese culture was like a majority, like way more visible of a culture than Korean culture growing up, like before K-Pop was really popular, like no one knew any Korean food or anything. So, I felt like I liked the name Japanese Breakfast because I felt like it was a name that people would be more curious about than Korean Breakfast. You know what I mean? and **it just doesn't sound as good.**

So, I think that that video was kind of a commentary on that. I'm not hiding behind this name. I'm not trying to like make people believe that I'm Japanese. It's just a separate moniker. So, it was a commentary on that and I think it was also—have you seen Annie Hall, the Woody Allen film Annie Hall?

J: Mhmm. yeah.

M: I know that Woody Allen is totally evil, but at one point I totally loved his films.

J: You can love the films without liking the man.

M: Yeah, it's especially hard because his persona is such a part of the film. It's harder to appreciate his work, but, um, there's that scene at the dinner table where he's with Annie Hall's waspy family and the camera cuts and all of a sudden he's just in orthodox Jewish clothing, looking like a Hasid. I feel like sometimes **when I do these interviews with people and they ask me about my heritage, that's part of how I feel like tokenized or whatever, so I kind of wanted to juxtapose that with this video.**

J: And I'm interested in the video and what you're saying beyond my own personal connection to the ideas of rejection and shame is what I'm reading into some stuff too, which I had a lot of growing up.

M: Mhmm.

J: And the attraction thing is fascinating because I've only ever dated white women.

M: Yeah. I've only dated white men, as well.

J: And Asian girls and other minorities would be attracted to me growing up but for some reason, I would never go out with them. And there's a big difference, obviously between the trope of the Asian woman and the Asian man.

M: Absolutely.

J: Both are very problematic, but I never could feel attractive as a person, wholly—

M: *Mm*. Mhmm

J: Until maybe the last five, six years. I always just thought it was something weird. But beyond that, your mention about these things: attraction, the body, the docile interpretation of Asian female bodies, the video counters that in a lot of ways. Is that intentional?

M: Mhm, yeah.Absolutely, yeah. And it's also just part of who I am. I have this heritage and it's what I look like and sometimes I feel like it's inflated but those are things I would do on a Saturday night as a young adult. I go to the bar. I'm riding on the back of my friends motorcycle. **That's like my local bar that I go to all the time. So, I thought there was a humor in that juxtaposition. And that dress is meaningful for me because my mom wore that to my wedding.** So, yeah, **I felt like it was a really meaningful video and it was definitely meant to represent something that isn't seen.**

J: And that's what these articles I'm working on are doing as well because when I came across an all Asian-faced jazz band when I was just looking through stuff about internment camps, I was like, fuck. Right? Cause this is music that is very American. This is loud boisterous swing bands, stuff like that, that people got down to in a big way, right? And to have people who all, more or less, at least to certain people, all look just like me was a really important thing. That it wasn't just whatever trope of wherever Asians are allowed to exist in the American consciousness: medical school, first chair violin in the orchestra, that kind of stuff. So your video also did that work for me too. Even seeing some of your performances live, when you wouldn't be wearing a sleeve and you could see tattoos and stuff like that… Academics read way too much into everything, right? and that's part of why I actually talk to people cause most people, if they were putting you into an article or something, they'd just like watch your video and make up everything about what's going on. And I know as a musician, there's a musical identity.

M: Mhmm

J: And there's also a larger cultural identity and not necessarily are you thinking about that larger cultural identity when you're just writing a fucking song.

M: Mhmm. Mhmm.

M: In college I studied creative writing… a lot of short fiction… wrote a lot of short fiction. The most successful short fiction sometimes focuses on a very physical, limited space. So, I feel like songs are in a similar format. It's anywhere from two to five minutes and you have a limited amount of time to express an idea or a space, so, I really like songs that put you in a moment or a scene and then kind of dissect the moment.

J: Who does that well? Songwriters.

M: I think that Bill Callahan does that really well. Like that song "Our Anniversary." I feel like I'm there. And some of my favorite writers do this, like Raymond Carver or Richard Ford, where I just feel like I am in this physical space watching something happen. There's this Bill Callahan song called "Our Anniversary" where I just feel like I'm watching him outside. There's this line, "turn the car on and let the battery die" about some kind of relationship, like, I'm not allowed to leave this isolated space, so you've drained the battery. I feel like I'm in that moment. I can feel that space. I feel like that, to me, is what I really enjoy trying to create. I enjoy trying to create a scene that someone feels like they could experience, that they're there watching it.

I'm also a very personal songwriter and I think a lot of the songs I've written in the last four years, I was really interested in one particular relationship that I was in that I felt emotionally manipulated and felt… this attempt to physically possess my body, like out of jealousy or whatever, to control it. So, in order to navigate that space, I adopted a male voice to maybe say what I thought this person was feeling or wanting to communicate. Or, I'll talk about that from the perspective of a sex worker who's trying to explain to someone that they might do something but their heart is there, because that's sometimes how I felt. I felt like this person wouldn't believe what I was saying and I kind of related to that kind of role.

I mean, I've dealt with tremendous loss and death and illness in my life, especially in the last five years because before my mom passed away, my mom Osa passed away from cancer and it's very much a part of my family.

J: Her sister?

M: Her younger sister, who I'm also very close to. So I think I'm simultaneously like scared that I have this gene that is inside of me and I have this impending sickness.

J: Were they both the same kind of cancer?

M: They were noth GI, but they weren't the same.

J: Ok.

M: It's very scary, so, I think about it a lot. So, this album in particular, I watched my mother's body deteriorate in a very real way, so a lot of that writing (concerning the body) has a lot to do with that as well.

M: Now that I've finished my second record, I can shift gears. I've been reached out to by a few literary agents so I'm gonna expand that essay into a memoir and the working title is *Crying in H-Mart.* Because I feel like H-Mart is this mecca of Asian Americans where, a lot of the times, they're placed out of the way, or, those neighborhoods are on the outskirts of an urban city. I feel like everytime I go to an H-Mart I have to travel half an hour of driving to get to this place where I feel like all of a sudden, I'm in another country. And it's such an emotional space for me because I started cooking after my mom passed away and it's so hard for me sometimes. You know, as a young kid I'm sure there was some Asian market, or like the Chinese place, or whatever, that you would go to as a kid.

J: That was huge for me. I remember climbing on the rice bags.

M: Yeah, totally! So, for me, I remember it was Sunrise Asian Market. My mom took me there and then they became a bigger store and we would go to there and we would always be stopping in. So, it's like a very nostalgic place that I feel like any Asian American kid, or many, grew up going to. So, it's very much a pilgrimage to the place. Then, I'm inevitably going to remember oh, I totally remember this rice, because this is the brand that mom got. I wish I could call my mom to remember what kind of sesame oil we got or like I saw, I don't know if you've had patbingsu before, you know every Asian culture has a shaved ice thing, you know? Seeing the red bean you put on the shaved ice, in the aisle on sale in the summer. I was just like, "fuck, I have to make this." I bought everything in order to recreate this really important memory from my childhood. I bought a shaved ice machine that day, because I was like, I have to do it! So, it's like such a special place and it's also really hard to see young asian girls with their mothers or three generations of grandma, mom and child shopping for whatever dinner they're going to make or eating in the food court together. It's so beautiful to me. So, I think that's such a special place and probably the start of what I'm going to write.

J: So is music a part of the creative expression for you? You're a writer, period? Or is there a specific musical identity? or is it all part of the same box of toys?

M: I think it's like changed over the years. I go back and forth between what I'm interested in. I just recorded another record… I feel like I engage with the recording process in a totally different way now where I feel like I'm using a co-producer to express myself with a skill set I don't have.

So, I was not allowed—I guess your father was involved with music but for me, I was really, really discouraged from being involved in the arts in any way. It was not an acceptable thing in my household. I don't think that my father had any real opinion about it but my father was largely a financial provider and wasn't really involved in my adolescence especially.

J: You're not as close as you were with your mother?

M: No. No. My mom was a homemaker, so, I was like her identity in a big way, and I'm an only child, so, even more so. For her, and one thing I've been wanting to explore is, it bothered me that my mom didn't have a job. As a feminist woman, it was something, as an adolescent, you just can't relate to.

J: Were you a feminist when you were an adolescent?

M: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

J: I didn't know that word when I was an adolescent.

M: I think I knew… (text message rings) I think it was hard for me to understand because my mom was like a very passionate woman, but it never bubbled up into anything more than keen interests, you know what I mean? So, she liked cooking but she would never dream of having a restaurant. It's too much work. She was a great cook, but didn't even maybe enjoy it. She really loved interior design and making a nice home. I mean, she liked being a homemaker I think. I don't know if it was just what she fell into, but, for me, it's like, if I like interior design, it's like, *ok, I have to go to school. I have to make this my career! I have to subsist off of that.* — that wasn't something that was part of her agenda at all and that was really confusing to me.

J: But, how do you feel about that now? A little more forgiving, now, right?

M: Oh, yeah, I'm not angry at all! I'm curious if she grew up in a different environment, if it would be different. I think it's very much a cultural thing for like women to feel, like… I felt like my mom saw her role as just as important as my father's role, but that was the role that she fell into and made sense for her.

J: How do you see her role?

M: I don't know, because I'm curious if she would have been a creative individual if she had been raised in a community that had valued that. My mom said to me once—my mom and I fought *a lot* when I was a teenager because I wanted so badly to be independent and creative and it was something she just did not understand or want to support because she was really afraid. Both of my parents grew up in extremely poor families and she really didn't want me to struggle financially and she also didn't want me to struggle mentally. She was concerned that the life of the artist is a very dark one and she felt that I had this kind of mental darkness that really

concerned her and wanted to do everything to steer me away from that in some way. Or was just waiting for me to grow out of it. Never really was all that supportive of that. Really was important for me to go to school. Never was an option—I couldn't even fathom going to Berklee School of Music, which the more I get involved in music and working with other people and collaborating with people, the more envious I am of, oh, if I had had the opportunity to like have studied production, I feel like, either I would have quit. I would have gotten tired of it, or, I would be so good at being able to communicate these sounds I have in my head.

J: Yeah, but you're so good at doing something (her style of songwriting), that if you had gone to Berklee, you wouldn't be able to do in the exact same way.

M: Yeah, exactly. That's true.
J: Also, we can't read at Berklee. We literally don't read books. You can read and are a very good writer. You wouldn't have gotten the Raymond Carver education. I had to go to a billion grad school to make up for that shit.

M: Yeah, so maybe I would have been in that situation.

J: Yeah, (but) it's wonderful. It's like a candy land, Berklee. It's great and wonderful.

M: Yeah, my co-producer went to Berklee and I'm, sometimes, very envious of his skill set..

J: But you use his skill set in collaboration?

M: I think it's just like it's how we value masculinity and femininity… There's this new buzz word "emotional labor," which is a new concept to me, and I feel like it's a really undervalued labor. Like in some way, emotional labor is largely associated with femininity and undervalued, in the same way that I feel like this pressure, this imposter syndrome, I feel like songwriting is more aligned with those things (femininity) and production is more aligned with masculinity. Obviously, there's like way more female songwriters than female producers, or sound engineers or whatever. And I think that's changing and exciting, but sometimes I feel embarrassed that I'm not more well versed in both aspects. There's this desire to be able to want to do it all. Or this embarrassment because I wasn't the sole producer on the record, or whatever.

J: No.

M: But, yeah. I know that's like not true, but it's a tough thing to negotiate.

J: Since you gotta go. I have one more thing I want to ask you. Um, did you listen to indie rock growing up? So, what I'm really fascinated by with you and several other Asian American young women who are finding success at this point—which, like I said, when I was touring, which wasn't that long ago, I quit like in 2010, I never played with other Asian people. Like one gig, where a girl played her ipod and played bass and sang really funny songs in Boston. That was the

only show where there was another Asian kid playing shows with me. And it's really wonderful. The same way seeing those Japanese American jazz bands, to see like you and Mitski and Thao in San Francisco. And I'm waiting for the Asian American boys. I haven't found those bands with national attention.

M: The only one I can think of is The Morning Benders.

J: Oh yeah!

M: And I think there's a guy in Health. And I think that the Smith Westerns might have had an Asian, yeah, Cullen Omori. Yeah…

J: They never came across my radar. But I don't listen to indie rock (that much) anymore, mostly, just crazy ethnomusicology shit all the time. But, indie rock is, traditionally this super white and pretty male space. It's a different landscape than when I was in a band, it's evolved I hope, even like you said (at the beginning of this interview), there's an idea of sensitivity and a wider breadth of issues (concerning gender and ethnicity). But, I still wonder, and I don't want this to be offensive or anything, going back to what you said about issues of attraction when you were a kid, like, are people only attracted to me because they got yellow fever? and they're playing into this fetishization of the Asian woman body. Do you ever have that fear or doubt in audiences that you play for or the space that is rock n' roll, pop music, indie rock, now a days? Or does it always feel completely comfortable? I'm thinking about (indie rock) touchstones of Rivers Cuomo here, right? Who is like a godfather of this current crop of musicians and boys, especially.

M: Yeah, I never thought of it that way.

J: I don't want to be a downer.

M: No, no, no, no. I think that's really valid. Um… I think that by inserting myself into this role, I felt like I was subverting that and in control of it in a way that like I wouldn't feel like if I was a backup dancer or actress in an indie rock music video. You know what I mean? This is like my voice and I have this agency and a lot of my fans, and a lot of Mitski's fans—because I toured with Mitski—a lot of them are young Asian girls.

J: More than your normal indie rock/pop show?

M: Absolutely.

J: You find you draw more people…

M: Because they can relate to it. It's a universal thing. People want to see themselves. They want to identify with it.

J: I'd love to see it.

And so, I also feel like younger Asian American boys or men are drawn to these spaces where we're performing, because they feel like this amazing thing is happening, finally.

I feel like, for a while, and especially with Little Big League, my other band. I would do certain things to kind of distance myself from being viewed that way. I think that I would dress more masculine and kind of have this more masculine bravado.

J: All boys in the band?

M: Yeah.

J: All white boys?

M: Yeah. I have a female drummer now, but there are no other Asian (musicians), not that I wouldn't welcome it.

J: yeah, what's up with that, man?

M: I have this friend that I would love to join the band as the bass player. You know, it sucks, because I think representation is so important and I would love to have a band full of Asian Americans or whatever (laughing) or people of all colors and like sexuality or whatever. But I also feel like, you know the people who you know and you have access to a certain pool of people. And they also have to not be busy and (have to be) happy with that role and you must drive a lot and get a long with them for long periods of time. So, it's just circumstance that those people happen to be white people that I knew in the scene.

J: And I guess that's the larger thing, the scene, right? Because I noticed that in watching your videos, which I assume are friends of yours who populate that. It's a very white space and until recently, that's been my world too. Now, I do a lot of work in the Asian American community and my work represents Asian Americans which has become a really important thing to me, but when I was a songwriter, only until the last two years, have I started, has my body in my songs, as a protagonist, become an Asian body. Which is really weird. When I was putting out records, the protagonist was always like me, but a whiter me.

M: I totally feel the same way. With creative writing, absolutely. When I was in college and writing, I felt like I could never have a narrative with someone like me because then the whole character would have to have this back story about how their Asian American identity influenced their life and if I don't explain that there would have to be this note in the margin (from a professor), "Tell us more about this identity" or whatever. Whereas you could just… *not* mention race at all and you would assume it's a white person. I felt like I had to, I really wanted to write

from these white male voices, and looking back, obviously, it's because those were the books I was reading. They're from white male perspectives because they were written by white men. So, it makes sense that I would think, that's what professional writing or great fiction is, is having a character like that. If I could (write like a white man) as an Asian American woman, then I must have accomplished something really great because I'm able to transform myself into this person. I don't have to write about myself, you know? And now, it's really great. I wrote this record out of necessity to just express myself and what I was going through.

J: You see yourself in there? You're in there?

M: Yeah, I think so.

J: Like, this body, is in there?

M: Yeah, I think I take on a couple of other voices in a couple of other songs. I don't feel like (sings) 🎶 I'm an Asian woman and I'm seeing this thing now and by the way…

J: Yeah, you can stop.

M: (belly laugh)

J: I'm putting that out as a 7 inch. "I'm an Asian woman and I'm singing these songs now"

M: Yeah, because that is the voice. This is my life. That was my experience and this is my body.

J: So, this wraps up, I know you you gotta split, this comes back to where we started. Part of this conversation, is me having a conversation with myself.

M: Of course.

J: Because we've been through some very similar things. The idea that the Asianess is not part of the music, I'm just writing music. But, by being able to put the body you actually have in there, that is a thing. No, you're not putting a traditional Korean voice in there, but you're putting your voice in there, and your voice is very important and your voice *is* Asian American, like my voice *is* Asian American, whether I'm singing or whether I'm giving a lecture… and it used to feel like this unnatural thing, because I would dabble. I'd try to write about Asian characters in songs when I was in my 20s and it would feel like, oh, that's not within the rest of (my work), it doesn't feel natural and now, it does, but it's unapologetic. (it doesn't) need a whole backstory. It's who the fuck I am. I'm this half asian dude from Nashville and I rock and I look like this, and that's how it is and *that* is normal. And that's the thing. What's inspiring about you and these other people's records is *this is normal.* And I'm glad kids who are like eighteen or whatever can come

see you play, especially women, right, who are Asian, because I didn't get that, and I still don't get that. I still don't have that Asian male role model.

M: Oh, there was, what's that guy…

J: Bruce Lee.

M: (laughs) No, no. Dirty Beaches. You should definitely check out Dirty Beaches because i feel like that is a very—cause you know there's the Asian American male stereotype that's like very effeminate or whatever and this guy is like an Asian Elvis. And he's like super masculine and handsome and writes these kind of low-fi, Elvis, crooner jams. I don't know if he's like active anymore but for a while, he was like kind of popular and it was really cool.

But yeah, I think that one thing that's been exciting about this new record was like I felt like I made this record out of necessity. It was very natural to me. I wasn't thinking about anyone experiencing or interacting with it at all. I put my mom on the cover because it's about my mom and I love that photo and maybe people thought it was me or people were curious about what it was, or what is this band name and what does it have to do with this photo. And then it got like such a great response that I think I was like wow, people like *me,* just like my natural voice. I'm going to start making work that is very authentic to me and what I'm interested in and what I find funny and interesting, like this "Everybody Wants To Love You" video, or whatever, and I started like really engaging with it in way I never had and it's like really exciting for me.

And even with this new record, there's this one line, there's this voice recording, my mom says something in Korean and I just didn't think about anyone feeling fucking isolated by that, how unique of a voice that is, you know what I mean? I want to hear my mom's voice on wax. For the rest of my life, I want to hear my mom's voice on wax. So, I think that having such a great response to that has encouraged me to do it more because why not? So, this new record has a reference to Jeju, which is like an island in Korea and it's just one funny little line which happened to be what the song is about. It doesn't dwell on it at all, but I like to do winks and nods like that now because there's a certain demographic that's like listening to that kind of thing. So, I'm excited.