CALLING ALL ASTRONAUTS
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CALLING ALL ARTISTS
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With her soulful voice and storytelling prowess, Olga Nunes creates an atmosphere that is both heartfelt and moving. This DIY singer/songwriter from San Francisco has created a musical world that will enchant. Her newest presentation, Lamp, is a collaborative effort between Olga’s imagination and the realities of her fans.

It is a journey that you won’t want to miss.
Forcing yourself to let go and learn from your experiences can make you grow as an artist a lot more quickly than by trying...
You began your songwriting career after spending a summer alone in a cabin and then began a solo cross-country road trip. Why all the alone time? Should everyone try having some real alone time rather than staying so plugged in all the time?

Ha! I think I’m the wrong person to ask that question to. I am never more than two feet from a connection to the internet. That being said, I do think that solitude is healthy for the mind. I fantasize about a day when I will disappear into a monastery and go silent for a while, literally silent. A fast to regain familiarity with one’s own daydreams.

My disappearance into the cabin was partially that, and partially licking my wounds after some particularly difficult personal experiences. There was a lot going on, but my idea at the time was to hole up in the middle of nowhere and become a writer. I think I am an alright writer, but I found writing fiction at the time to be particularly agonizing, so I started singing to distract myself and keep myself company. A friend overheard me and complimented me, and I realized that music was something I was capable of. ’Id always wanted to sing, but didn’t think I had it in me.

Turntable.fm was huge boost to getting the word out about your music. Can you tell us how this came about? Do you think social media can now make or break a DIY artist’s career? How?

I got invites to Turntable and tried the service in the first two weeks or so of launch. I became instantly addicted. I could share things I loved with other people and get feedback — but the real thrill, was being able to share my own music, and get people’s take on it instantly. I think one of the reasons people were really engaged was the fact that I was one of the few musicians on the site in those first weeks. You can connect intimately with a group of strangers and listen to songs and discuss your feelings about them without the two things interrupting each other. Being able to share my own music in that setting was really rewarding.

I think social media is now a sort of catch-all term for talking to people on the internet. Look at Pomplamoose. Julia Nunes, no relation, who just launched a Kickstarter to the tune of $77K, supported by the fan base she grew through posting YouTube videos. I just read about Daria Musk a few days ago, who launched her career by being the first musician to take advantage of Google+ Hangouts. She played a Hangout to 9000 people on her second day on Google+.

I’m unsure that social media can break your career. I think the biggest thing that can break your career now is silence. With the increasing move towards non-label supported acts, the bonus falls on musicians do the legwork — reaching out to people and connecting. Silence is the thing that will kill you.

Aside from music making, you also do some filmmaking as well. How did you end up getting involved in the “Boomdeyada video for XKCD? Are you a math/tech geek yourself?

I would say I’m not. I’d also probably be lying. I don’t self-identify as a geek, but I love XKCD, Doctor Who, Nerdfighters, Joss Whedon, MBG...mean, I like to think I’m a slippery girl that labels don’t stick to very well, but I’m also a person who lives on the internet. I love comic books. I think I’m not really sure if that makes me a geek, because a lot of geek culture is basically mainstream now. Doctor Who, for example, is one of the top rated shows in the UK. So there’s that.

The Boomdeyada song came about when my friend Elaine Doyle and I were chatting while I was living in London. XKCD had done a spoof of the Discovery Channel's Boomdeyada commercial, and we thought, wouldn’t it be neat if we recorded the XKCD lyrics to the tune of the original song? We made lists of people it would be fun to get involved and split it up. I asked friends Neil Gaiman and Cory Doctorow and she chased down Wil Wheaton. We just went down the list of people we thought wouldn’t mind being silly with us. It was ridiculous. And very fun.

About the same time, I recorded a scratch track of me singing the song for people to sing along with, for timing, and to get everything in the right key. An artist out of Israel named Noam Raby tracked me down, and asked if he could use the song in the animation he did of the same XKCD comic, and I said yes. So I ended up in two XKCD videos, sort of by accident.

Minute Minute Month is a collection of minute long songs written and recorded 3 a week for a month. What was the benefit of recording songs in this way? Do you feel there’s something more honest in songs that are written and recorded quickly without the chance to rethink everything a million times?

It was INFINITELY helpful. There’s this great book called Art & Fear by David Bayles and Ted Orland, that a friend gave me a few years ago. In it there’s this great anecdote about a ceramics teacher who decides he will grade half his class on sheer quantity of clay pots produced, and the other half on the criteria of being able to create a single, perfect pot. At the end of the term, the perfect pot group had done a lot of theorizing, discussing, and intellectual triangulation of what made up the “perfect” pot, but hadn’t produced any good work. The group that was graded on how MANY pots they had produced, had created lots of high-quality work.

You learn by doing. Forcing yourself to let go and learn from your experiences can make you grow as an artist a lot more quickly than by trying to perfect a single thing.

Having done it both ways, I’d love to sit and write fifty songs in rapid-fire. I think songs recorded quickly probably are a lot more honest, in spite of yourself. You’re moving too fast for censorship. I just learned Adele wrote 21 in only three months. That album feels very close to the bone, and personal, I think, as a result.

How did you get involved with Neil Gaiman and Shipwrek in creating the songs for the Maps for the Open Road EP? How does working with insanely talented people such as these inspire you in your own work?

I am lucky to have vastly talented friends of all stripes. I think I have a compulsion to rope friends into creating random things with me, and luckily, most of my friends share that same compulsion. We end up as sounding boards for each other. In Neil’s case, I sent him a dream and he sent me a song based on the dream. I added music and wrote some piano around it. With Shipwrek, he sent me some music and I wrote a song on top of it. Then I sent him a half-finished song, and he wrote some music underneath it. It often comes out of dialogue. The sort of “...what if?” line of questioning that makes you expand the realm of possibility. There’s no doubt that it’s inspiring to me, but I’d go a step farther and say it’s integral to how I work.

Your new album, Lamp, weaves a fictional story about two characters, Lamp and Lux, who haven’t seen each other in years. You are doing this not only through the music on the album, but also through video and art. What made you decide to incorporate all these different art styles into the presentation of this album?

I can’t help myself. It would probably be more sane to just do an album, but it’s hard for me not to see this whole universe of things attached to an idea. Once you’ve seen it, you can’t un-see it. I find myself falling down a lot of rabbit holes since starting this project, realizing that each of these pieces has an infinite number of steps attached to it.

Still, I think we live in a world where it’s not enough to just re-
lease an album. I think creating this album as its own universe is a way to give it context, and give it purchase. You’re connecting to this whole world through the songs, which I think has more emotional resonance.

People can also become a part of the story of Lamp by sending in their own love letters they’ve received or written. How are you using these letters? Have you received any that have been particularly touching to you?

Yes, deeply. Some of the letters people have sent me have made me cry on the spot. They’re very raw, and honest, and most were sent under the caveat of anonymity. A woman wrote to me, telling me about how she and her brother found a cache of love letters belonging to their parents. The last week of their mother’s life they spent reading her old love letters to her, bringing her back to lucidity for moments at a time. She sent me one of the letters, and it was heart-breaking. She even included photographs of her parents. This letter, as well as many others, are being folded into the fictional love letters between Lamp and Lux. Sometimes they are excerpted verbatim, and sometimes they are edited slightly and written as Lux’s own words. I loved the idea of asking people to be part of the story, and making the fabric of these two fictional characters woven out of real love letters.

You are releasing this album one mp3 at a time until the entire story is told and then releasing the physical Lamp album. I find this a very interesting way to release an album. Where did you come up with the idea to release this way?

It’s an awareness of how long the process of an album takes. If music is a dialogue, I didn’t want my end of the conversation to take years between speaking. I also think that we’re in an era where people are used to things appearing instantly. We can create a song and put it online the same day. Putting your work out as you finish it is another way to involve people in the process.

Obviously, you would probably not have been allowed to do all that you have done with this album were you under the restrictions of a major label. What other advantages do you see to having your own power when it comes to your music? How have you managed to do it all yourself and what advice would you give to other young singer/songwriters looking to get themselves “out there?”

I’m still not super clear on what major labels contribute to artists today. On the one hand, you probably can’t create a Lady Gaga without a major label, but on the other, could you create a Skrillex? He’s on a subsidiary of Atlantic Records, and just cleaned up at the Grammys. Bassnectar seems to have the same amount of draw as Ok Go, or Amanda Palmer. Labels are really good at releasing albums in the traditional fashion, but they don’t seem to have caught up yet to what makes a career make sense now, so in a lot of ways, they serve as dead weight.

Songwriting, as a general rule, really has a lot to do with laying yourself bare for everyone to see and judge. While Lamp is created around a fictional story, it still ultimately comes from you. How are you incorporating the storyline of Lamp and Lux into the album while still remaining true and honest to yourself?

The great thing about Lamp, for me, is that it is a sort of concept album in reverse. I write the music, and then the story gets written around it, rather than vice versa. The music serves as a soundtrack for a film that doesn’t exist yet. So the songs are still honest, and my own, and the fictional characters end up using the songs as touchstones in their own story. The fiction is more or less a reaction to the music.

I see in your bio that you have never had a lightsaber fight with a gnome. May I ask why not?

Because I only had a Nerf gun handy at the time. (Gnomes hate Nerf guns.)

If you were a cartoon character, who would you be and why?

Julie Winters. I hope she counts. She’s a comic book character, and I’m going to stretch it. I always had a crush on Sam Kieth’s characters growing up as a kid. I thought she was sexy, and brave.

Who would you absolutely love to collaborate with?

Royal de Luxe. They’re a theatre company out of France that creates these ridiculously large mechanical puppets, things the size of buildings, and tell fairytales with them. I would love to write music for that kind of experience. The amount of magic in their whole aesthetic breaks my brain with wonderfulness.

What is your latest obsession?

Instaprint. They’re these little doohickeys made by a company called Breakfast that are on Kickstarter right now. You hang them on the wall and they spit out photos from Instagram. So, you could be sitting in a cafe in Brooklyn, and getting photos printed out one at a time from Paris, as they’re being taken. I love it. I love tech that makes the world a tinier, friendlier place. Also Japanese candy. Especially the bits covered in black sesame.

What would you most like the readers to know about Olga Nunes?

I’m secretly an eight-year-old pretending to be a grown-up. I have a sort of sock-sponsorship from Sock Dreams, which I think supports this theory — I have more socks than just about anything else at this point. I think one of the most important things to remember is your sense of play.

http://olganunes.com/