

I'M A DREAMER AND YOU'RE A TIGER

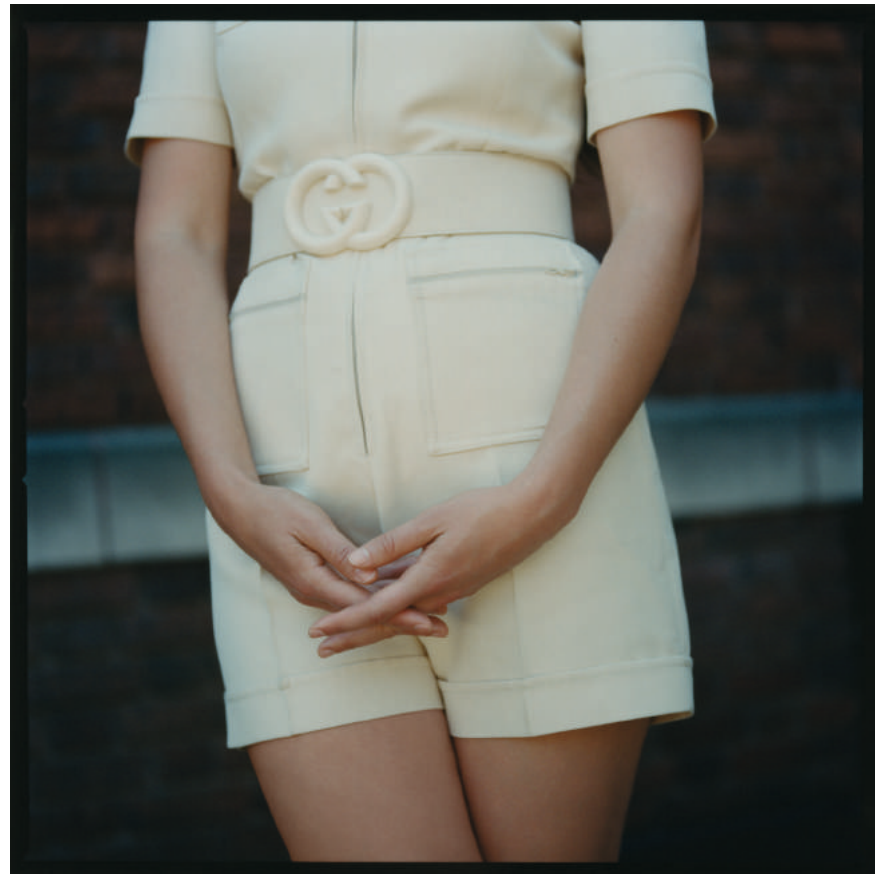
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAREN COLLINS



ALL CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES GUCCI.



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As Weyes Blood, American singer, songwriter and musician Natalie Laura Mering emerged out of the experimental noise music scene to create a series of celebrated records. Her latest, *Titanic Rising*, deals in themes of love, pain and lost connection. She talks with Olivia Gagan about performance, politics and sifting the past – both collective and personal – for buried treasure.

NATALIE LAURA MERING INTERVIEWED BY OLIVIA GAGAN

Olivia Gagan: Hi, Natalie. Where are you right now? You're on the West Coast?

Natalie Laura Mering: Yeah, I'm actually in the woods right now, in the Sierra Nevadas, in this little town.

Oh, amazing. Okay.
I am escaping LA.

Are you doing any work or are you just chilling out?

Just chilling. I'm gonna do some energy-field work, if you know what I mean.

So, you've got a bit of time to rest. With *Titanic Rising* coming out, has this year been pretty crazy for you compared to previous

years? How has it felt compared to what's gone before?

I've been doing this for a really long time and this year has been no different. Just touring and doing lots of shows. This is the first year, though, that we've done TV and some other really exciting performances that took a lot of planning, and also more nerves... But it's been pretty steady for a while.

What's it like bringing your work out into the open, into that performance space, after living with it by yourself or just with your collaborators for so long? Does performing suit you?

I think performance is maybe the most rewarding thing as a musician, because you get to

go out and do your thing once and be celebrated for it. I feel like when you're making a record it's a little bit more existential. I enjoy that aspect, but the results aren't nearly as immediate as just going out on stage and playing. There's something really vital about performing as an artist. Especially these days, too, when physical copies of music aren't as valuable as they used to be. Because most people can probably stream your music or get it for free. The show has taken on another special quality.

A lot of artists talk about that sense of communion you get with performance as well. If the moment's right, there's something going on with you and the audience. Do you feel that?

Oh, yeah, I do. There have been some real-

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ly heightened moments at shows for sure. It’s like a congregation. A weird pagan church or something.

Does the touring life suit you? Always moving—do you find it exhausting or energising?

I really do enjoy the simplicity of it. When you’re at home, there’s a million things you could do. So most of the time I end up doing very little because I’m probably overwhelmed. Like, ‘Oh, you could do this. You could write a song, or you could meet up with this person you haven’t talked to in months. You could do this. Or you could do this.’

On tour, you have to get in the van and then you have to soundcheck and then you have to play this one show. And that simplicity is really nice, actually. But touring is tiring and you do have to find ways to recover from being a wandering minstrel or whatever. There are certain things about home life that I miss, but I’m very lucky. I get to come home to, like, a beautiful dog and a pretty decent apartment. I think I’ve got my home pretty dialled in, but it took a while. For a long time, I didn’t really have a home.

Where is home for you? Where have you settled?

Home is LA for the last four years. I think before that, I moved pretty much on the dot every three years since I was 17. I’ve lived in a lot of places.

Can we talk about the album? Can you tell me a little bit about the process of making the cover of Titanic Rising? [On the cover, Natalie floats in a nineties-era teenage bedroom submerged underwater.] What influenced how it looked and how you made it?

Well, I’ve always wanted to work with water. I love underwater stuff and I wanted to tap into some of the symbolism on the record and in the songs. Being a kid that grew up in the nineties, the bedroom is this strange place of initiation into society where you generate your individuality. You hang up your posters. You decide what you idolise. You decide what you believe in, and it’s all just pretty much a huge bust. There’s nothing about the teenage bedroom that really initiates you for reality or real life in the real world, but it still is this sacred, magical, nostalgic place for me.

It’s about that disappointment of being a generation that was raised on movies and stuff that doesn’t really hold up over time. [But] you’ve got to find ways to still embrace those cultural references and things can still have the weight and meaning you want them to have. And that was what I was trying to do with the cover—show the bedroom as this secret, subconscious place you can return to.

The cover makes me think about how much time I spent in my teenage bedroom just thinking and mooning about and reading books

and listening to music and reading magazines and how much that probably formed the bedrock of a lot of my tastes now.

Exactly.

Because I just had so much time to consume stuff. Even if it wasn’t the most highbrow things, but those teenage years can be such a hugely fertile time for your creativity because you have so much time.

Yeah. You don’t have to generate money! Somebody is feeding you. You’re just daydreaming.

You can get bored. You can obsess. Do you feel that you can still do that? Do you need to carve that time out now as an adult, or is it less important?

I have made a big effort these days to rekindle that type of inspiration and fire. Because for me, for a long time I was so utilitarian and just writing songs, that I forgot the inner child. Every artist has an inner child that needs to be entertained.

So if you’re sitting in a white, blank room trying to write, you could probably come up with something. But maybe if you hung up a stupid poster next to the piano and got a little bouquet of flowers or some trinkets that only mean something to you, then all of a sudden, you’ve got all these reminders of things that you once found inspiring.



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I’ve actually been buying posters again. Big, funny, nineties posters. Now that I’m an adult I don’t just tack them onto my wall, I frame them—but it’s basically the same as that teenage bedroom, but slightly updated. It’s been really great to surround myself with these things that culturally, as an adult, it’s very easy to write off. At one point they were my myths and my gods and all my magic.

It’s a weird thing with movies like Titanic. We’re around the same age, and I remember seeing it underage in the UK in the cinema. Girls were intensely sobbing throughout it, almost like they were having some strange communal crying experience.

[Laughing] Ohh, yeah.

Then when it came out on video, we had sleepovers watching it multiple times. It really captured imaginations for some reason. It was this real Western pop culture moment.

I think it was such a huge film and it was definitely engineered for little white girls. I think that’s why little white girls were like, ‘Oh my God!’ The whole point of referencing the Titanic really has a lot to do, these days, with what we’re facing in terms of climate change.

Where it’s like, the hubris of man has become so bloated and distorted that there’s no real way to convince people that fossil fuels and technologies are melting the ice caps. And instead of

sinking a big luxury ship, they’ll be sinking civilisation.

When I watched Titanic as a kid, my takeaway was, like, ‘Oh, the hubris of man.’ Obviously the story is about Leo and Kate Winslet, the love story. But I really took away that the third class took the brunt of it and suffered tremendously at the hands of rich white men, industrialists. Which is exactly what’s going on now. So my takeaway was definitely more environmental, but, basically, I don’t think that was the takeaway for the rest of the world... I still can’t put my finger on it. Why isn’t this a completely celebrated story in terms of, we don’t know what we’re doing [with the environment]? I think in my heart I was hoping that movies would act how myths might have acted in old ancient cultures, where myths were the religion.

You and Hozier both released albums this spring that thematically, to me, felt like they were siblings... There were ideas about finding little scraps of optimism, even if the apocalypse is imminent. And you both had album artwork where you’re floating in submerged rooms. [The current Amazon TV show Homecoming references an imaginary movie called ‘Titanic Rising’, too.] Do you believe in zeitgeists?

Yes. I had never heard of Hozier. I don’t know that guy! I live under a rock. And there was another artist, a rapper, who also did an underwa-

ter cover too. Somewhere on social media there’s a tweet of our three album covers all next to each other and it’s pretty cool... [To me,] the water represents the subconscious, and when you do something underwater, you’re going into a symbolic realm because nobody can breathe under there. But neither of us look like we’re dead on our album covers. We’re just chilling.

Yeah, you look like you’re just entering that world rather than being consumed by it. You’re floating, you’re not dead. Your music has, to my mind, this delicateness and nostalgia despite dealing with current concerns and potentially very painful themes. How have you developed sonically over the years? How have you arrived at where you’re at now? Would you agree that you’ve got a delicacy to your work?

Definitely. I think when I was first starting I was really enamoured with noise music—stuff that was very aggressive and loud and chaotic and improvisational and slightly deconstructed, because at the time that seemed like the most innovative thing to do. I think a lot of people thought it was the next wave. I think you can’t really commodify music like that, which I think is why it never had that much mainstream success.

But I always wrote songs and I always was making beautiful music, and I think I was a little embarrassed at how beautiful it was. And then, after doing louder, crazier music for a while, I re-

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turned to the beautiful music because I realised it was something that would be more celebrated and needed from people that didn't want to hear crazy, raunchy, noise music.

Then I also realised that I was better at that than screaming my head off. I was like, 'Oh yeah. This is what I'm supposed to do, and maybe it's not as innovative.' I read about this painter, I forget his name. But he said something that really resonated with me at the time, which is, 'The new avant-garde is painting trees and making sandwiches for your kid.' I was like, 'Yeah, that's where we're at.'

It's harking back to something old. I was like, 'Man, I just want to write songs like how they used to, because those are my favourite songs.' Artists like Hoagy Carmichael and Harry Nilsson and Joni Mitchell and stuff like that. The transition was very natural. I think I just had to rebel against it in my youth for a while, because I got so caught up in the idea that there could be a new genre of music, a new movement.

Is it still feeding into your work in some ways, that more experimental sound?

Oh, for sure. I think when you explore sound and sonic potential in that way, it's almost like if you're a painter and you spend four years doing abstract painting—that's certainly going to make your new, realist paintings better, because you're still working with the interactions of the

colours and the textures. I love to make parallels to painting. I think deep down inside, I wish I was a painter too [laughs].

I'll have to look that quote up. In terms of what was feeding into your work at the point of making Titanic Rising, what was going into it politically and socially, personally? Where were you at when you were making the record?

I was definitely overwhelmed. I think that the Trump presidency has been really intense and overwhelming for everybody, and it continues to be. It continues to defy the laws and social norms that we thought were in place. It drains your faith in institutions when a president is allowed to be so completely off the hook. As kids, we had a lot of faith in institutions. Bill Clinton was about to be impeached for getting a blow job. Environmentalism was just cleaning things up. Environmentalism in the nineties was like, 'Ah, man, all we've gotta do is get out there and pick up some trash and we're good.'

That headspace is way different than the headspace we occupy now, where environmentalism is not just cleaning up and the president can do way worse than get a blow job and still be exempt from being impeached. The first song on the record is basically me singing to myself as a little girl. Being like, 'A lot is going to change. More than you think.' And on top of that, social media and all this different technology has shifted the way

people communicate and relate to one another, which is very isolating. There's also a song about internet dating.

'Everyday'?

Yeah. The Tinder song! 'True love is making a comeback for only half of us/The rest just feel bad...' I've talked to so many people that can't do the internet dating thing and are just trying to figure it out.

The record sounds like you're carving out a space to just exist, an antidote to a world that is completely overwhelmed with data and news. Do you find making music acts as a form of escape from the world, or do you feel like you're very much digging into it and engaging with what's going on around you as you're making it? I suppose what I'm trying to say is, is it a retreat for you, or does it feel like you're actively doing the work and engaging with political issues?

That is a really good question. I struggle, personally, a lot with how busy I am making music and doing shows because it does deter and take away from me doing social activism. I'm a huge fan of Greta Thunberg. If I could dedicate as much of my time as she does to spreading a message about environmentalism and the climate crisis, that would be, to me, the ultimate work, versus writing a record for people to listen to while they're sad about it. [Laughing.]

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But, this is what I do best. With the tools that I have, I'm trying to do as much as I can. I'm trying to create, yeah, a respite, but also seeds of change by being able to conceptually create a human emotion surrounding such a colossal, existential problem. Hopefully that will be relatable to people and inspire a deeper personal shift. Because I think the problem with the climate change issue, is that I think people struggle to become personally attached to it. It's very existential. So hopefully my music is a retreat, but hopefully, it's also art that's created about it to get people motivated.

You mentioned the risk of overwhelm and burnout and it seems like the biggest modern hazard to everyone's mental health. I personally always felt guilty for retreating from the world, but I'm now starting to see it as a necessity. And rest as a creative resource. You've mentioned earlier that you've gone off for a few days away. How do you rest now? How do you retreat?

I mean, it's really hard. Especially with the phone. I'm constantly being like, 'Should I turn my phone off?' I think people need to carve out the psychic space to breathe and think. We're just inundated constantly with information and also with comparisons of ourselves to other people. It's pretty easy to compare yourself to somebody else when you're constantly voyeuristically checking out what they're doing on their feeds. I don't think people even know how badly they need a break.

Not even just don't go to work, but don't pick up your phone. I always try to remember that there was a time where time moved slower and there wasn't this constant feeling of anxiety.

I was thinking of those teenage bedrooms that you're referencing on the Titanic Rising cover. They're not hidden beneath the surface now. They're not private spaces to rest—they're on social media. They're the background to selfies. People can view and consume your bedroom in real time. Whereas I kind of like the idea that no one knows what my teenage bedroom looked like.

Yeah. Yeah. I feel very grateful that I didn't have to grow up with selfies. But I will say the Gen Z kids seem particularly advanced. It feels like maybe because they grew up with [social media], they might have a better chance of surviving the pitfalls of it. I feel like our generation was caught off guard a little bit.

Yeah. Teenagers and kids make me hopeful. People like Greta Thunberg, but also just when I talk to people that are younger than me. They're often just so much smarter than I was at their age and to my mind, more politically active and engaged. I don't know if that's because of the circumstances they're growing up in.

It's true. I mean, I do get scared because I think of Gen Z kids that are liberal, but there are also Gen Z kids in America who are caught in the white supremacist algorithms on YouTube, just

hating women on their computers. That's scary too. I think that that's more of a problem with Google and Facebook than anything else, because they get so much money from those clicks and stuff.

Yet when I'm listening to the record, there's this sense of reassurance, that you're telling someone, you've got what it takes. You're going to be just fine. It sounds to me like you're saying, 'We might be going down, the ship might be sinking, but we're in this together. There are things we can hold onto. There's hope in there as well.'

Yeah. I think humans are remarkably elastic. Even in this day and age right now, as First World people, it's hard for us to conceive of, for example, what people in Syria are going through. There are places in the world right now where people and the human spirit is being absolutely tested to the max. And those people, some of them are still surviving. And I think that's the message.

You once described hope as being like a muscle you have to exercise. How do you strengthen that muscle? Is it something you've gotten better at over the years?

Umm, let me think. I think for me, yeah, I've gotten a little better at it. It's almost like growing up. It's like learning how to deal with getting older. You can never change your external circumstances completely, so the only thing you can really change is what's going on internally.

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As soon as I think of it that way, it's like, 'Okay, I can get really busted up about reality and what's happening in the Amazon and everything.' And I do. Things like that will affect me for days at a time, but I'll always come out the other end knowing that if I can keep it together within me, then that will help a lot of other people too and then I can positively impact their external circumstances. It's all about creating an environment internally that can ride those waves of negativity.

Do you get a sense of catharsis from your work? Do you finish a record and go, 'Okay, I can leave that era of my life alone now. I've dug into it. I've worked through it. I can move on to other things.' Or is the past this constantly replenishing source that you can keep coming back to for inspiration?

I think I keep occupying the same realm and the same themes. They do change a little bit, but I feel like I can't help the person I am. I've always been this way! [Laughing.] I've always been sounding the alarm on the hubris of man and being bummed out about modern forms of communication. I do think that there is a little bit of catharsis, especially with the shows. But then I'm always constantly hungry for the next thing. And usually once I put something out I'm already like, 'Okay, what's next?'

So would you describe yourself as someone that looks forwards? Because your music is often described as nostalgic. It's drawn to the

past in terms of its sounds, but personally, are you someone that lives in the past, the future or the present? Where are you happiest sitting?

I'll admit it, I do get pretty happy on the nostalgia boat. I love old movies and things like that. But I am thinking about the future when I make art, and I think the future will always be a synthesis of the past and the present. I think both are needed. I think people are just inherently nostalgic and you have to harness that for your benefit, as opposed to having capitalism hijack it and manipulate people. Which I see a lot with Netflix. There's such an overabundance of shows that hit this one nostalgia note.

Shows like Stranger Things?

Yeah, we eat [them] up because it's like, 'We miss that.'

Yearning for simpler times, that weren't actually that simple.

It was probably a simpler time for white people. Going back and watching old movies, I can't help but to see all the little hidden racist moments and things like that. There are certain movies that are pretty much unwatchable at this point. I think for people of colour, it's a big moment to be like, 'Told you so. We've known this the whole time.' It's important that we all see it. Sometimes with nostalgia, there's a little bit of privilege in it. In certain circumstances for sure.

Yeah, absolutely. Even just having the time and the ability to be able to look back and

enjoy your past I guess is a privilege in itself. I've had 30 minutes of your time, so I'll just round off. What's next? What's happening in the next few months for you?

I'm going to be going on tour. I'm doing some headlining shows on the East Coast and then opening up for Kacey Musgraves.

Amazing.

Which I'm ecstatic about. I think she's incredible. And then I'm going to be doing a European tour, and then hopefully taking a little rest for the end of the year.

Sounds good. Cool. Okay. I would happily sit and chat here for ages, but I'll let you get on with your day. I realise I've been asking you heavy questions at 10 o'clock in the morning.

No, I appreciate it. I think this was a really good chat. I hope you enjoyed it too.

I did, I did. I'll let you get on with your day.

Okay. Thank you so much. Have a great day.

You too! Thanks Natalie. Take care.

Bye.

Bye.

SITTINGS EDITOR: LEITH CLARK.
HAIR: JILLIAN HALOUSKA AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKE-UP: CHARLOTTE DAY AT ART DEPARTMENT USING MAC COSMETICS.



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