

20 Questions with Juliana Hatfield

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In April 2010, Juliana Hatfield launched a pledge drive through PledgeMusic.com to try to raise money to fund the recording of her next album. See: <http://www.pledgemusic.com/projects/juliana-hatfield>.

Among the second wave of rewards offered in exchange for specified pledges was “20 questions”, described as “A Q & A with me via email—send me a list of 20 questions and I’ll go down the list and answer in an email.” The required pledge was only \$20. Fortunately I was able to scoop up one of these bargains. Especially in light of her generosity, my questions were intended to be quick and easy to answer with just a few words. Also, sorry if they seem unimportant or trite, but out of respect for her boundaries, I tried to avoid asking anything I wouldn’t ask a casual acquaintance at a cocktail party. Especially as a possible follow-up to her book, that approach ruled out a bunch of important and interesting topics and issues. She explicitly gave me permission to share most of her responses with her fan community. Figuring others would be interested, and hoping other people who also pledged for the question-and-answer e-mails will also share, here they are.

1. “Universal Heart-Beat”: has time, experience, and/or age softened your view that “A heart that hurts is a heart that works,” i.e. (apparently) that feeling emotional pain is more human, ‘better’ if you will, than numbness, apathy, or emotional disconnect?

A: I think the view is a soft view. It’s empathic and sympathetic. Numbness has its benefits, for sure. But numbness is only good occasionally, in small doses. If you are always numb then you are never fully conscious to the joys and wonders of life. And you are probably not tuned in deeply enough to make good art. Ups and downs.

2. “Outsider”: “Did you ever see the birth / or first steps of a _____?” This part of the song seemed like maybe it was about some kind of bird, but the word sounds like “tune”, so maybe this is really about the process of creating a song, or what?

A: It is “tune”. You got that right. I was indeed talking about songwriting or in a larger sense, being a creative person and feeling the call of duty to create (write or paint, or whatever it is). This call, for me, has often seemed to take me away from people—the creative urge is often/always stronger than the urge to spend time with or to bond with other humans. Sometimes I have to stop my car when I’m driving and pull over in order to write down some ideas. And all this is what has made me feel like an outsider—the need for aloneness. I think any artist will tell you that it’s kind of a curse but it’s also an incredible gift. The chorus is explaining it: I’m looking out of a hotel room window at someone—maybe a stranger, maybe someone I wish I knew better—with a sense of longing and wishing things could be some other way but they can’t be because I am who I am.

3. “You Are the Camera”: As an amateur photographer with an interest in the psychological aspects of interacting with human subjects, I wonder, assuming you have a photographer that you know personally and with whom you’re comfortable (apparently like Jonathan Stark), do you like having your picture taken, or do you generally find it a chore?

A: I hate being photographed but once in a while I like the results so I keep trying as a subject. I’m just so uncomfortable in front of cameras. So self-conscious. Stiff. I feel like cameras are so confrontational and like an assault on me. And there aren’t many photos that have captured the real me. My father took some shots of me in our

patio when I was about 11 and these are my favorites of all time and the only ones that look like who I think I am.

4. “Road Wrath”: a sincere expression of frustration with that large proportion of American drivers who apparently got their licenses in Cracker Jack boxes, or a lampoon of those with road rage, or a mixture of both, or something else?

A: I guess it’s both. Just sort of commenting on American culture but also trying to tell my own self to lighten up because I am a really impatient driver and not too tolerant of bad drivers.

5. “Some Rainy Sunday”: about a specific person or incident (not asking who / what), or more generally about not ‘settling’ / committing when faced with any significant doubts, or something else?

A: It’s really a song about manic-depression or cyclothymia, I think. Doing things when feeling high that maybe will be regretted when low. You know? I don’t remember for sure but maybe I was feeling trapped in a relationship and wanting freedom so that’s why “inside love’s prison”. But then knowing that when I was alone I would feel lonely again. Or maybe I missed someone and regretted leaving? Don’t remember.

6. “Sunshine”: Avoiding any direct question of personal regrets and “the darkness of [your?] wasted youth”, are too many hard-core music fans too oblivious to / uncaring about whether some great music has emerged in substantial part from, and even because of, the musicians’ pain?

A: I’m not sure I understand the question but I do think that people get that pain makes for great art sometimes. (It’s an energy that can be used creatively.) I think that is generally accepted. But that doesn’t necessarily make people especially sympathetic to artists in pain. Because everyone has pain of some kind. Misery is universal. Artists aren’t special. Well, they are, but they also aren’t.

7. “Don’t Let Me Down”: about being in a tough spot and placing one’s entire trust

and well-being in someone else’s hands or (briefly) what?

A: It’s another song about songwriting. I am talking to my idea of god or to the muses—during a creative roadblock or lull—and sort of begging for the inspiration and ideas to keep coming.

8. “What Do I Care”: Not sure I can understand the words in the line that’s something like, “In my muumuu (?) you can’t see my blah-blah”, which could be giberish, or maybe the loose-fitting dress-like garment stereotypically worn by older women of not-high socioeconomic status?

A: I think I am saying “momo”, definitely not “muumuu”. I am singing nonsense at this point because I didn’t have any words. A lot of this album was free-associated stuff and automatic writings put together to fit the musics. Trying to express some unconscious with imagery. Usually I have lyrics for everywhere but this album was a little experimental lyrically and I let it be a little looser than normal. The song has something to say about my place (or no-place) in the history of rock, and I was feeling frustrated about my obscurity and lack of attention paid to my work, and there’s something in here maybe about how shitty it is that female performers are paid attention to and rewarded when they show off their boobs, etc., and so maybe I’m trying to get something out about that (you can’t see my blah-blah / a body part that other female singers expose? type of thing). Now that I am thinking about it, I think I might have heard the word “momo” somewhere. It may be an article of clothing in some other culture.

9. “Digital Penetration”: I love the line “Shiny girls with no opinions” (cf. the very enjoyable Lush satire “Tinkerbell” from their *Topolino* EP), but don’t think I understand “Bring the dogs to them so they can chose.” Maybe the “dogs” are men whose natures are simple enough, or low enough, that they prefer shiny girls with no opinions; or maybe they’re literally dogs; and

maybe the girls are choosing the dogs, or maybe the dogs are choosing the girls, or maybe the choice is at least somewhat mutual—I don't know. Not looking for a dissertation, but a few words of basic explanation would be very appreciated.

A: "Bring the dogs to them so they can choose"—That line was literally about [an entertainer]. If I remember right. But I have a terrible memory so maybe don't quote me on this. I was watching her reality show with [her husband] when they were married, and she wanted to get a dog, so someone brought some dogs to her mansion so she could pick which dog she liked. She didn't have to even move her ass off her couch, to the shelter or breeder or pet store or whatever. At the time I thought that was just the height of stupid Hollywood starlet laziness and entitlement.

And the "shiny girls with no opinions" was maybe a reference to [another entertainer] in some network TV interview in which she was chewing gum and was asked a question about what she thought about something former Pres. George W. Bush was doing—maybe the war in Iraq? war on Terror?—and she said something like, "I support my president. He's my president. We have to support him," in her little southern-girl voice, with a mild blank Stepford Wife-y smile, like the girl really had/has no opinions about anything. None of them seem to have any opinions. They can't express a real point of view or they might offend or alienate some portion of their demographic.

And pop culture was, was at that time and is still to some extent, very boring because everyone was so afraid to make waves or to be honest in public. That is why [another entertainer] circa a couple of weeks ago (March 2011) was so fascinating to everyone—he was the only major Hollywood star publicly expressing any real fervent opinions about anything—the only one daring to speak truth to power, however ill-advised or mentally ill the speaking was/is.

10. "Digital Penetration": The title might refer to the replacement of analog systems with computerized ones and the resulting societal changes, or it may be a rather clinical term for manual sexual activity—I don't know, and can't seem to really connect it to the lyrics. Again, not looking for a dissertation, but a few words of basic explanation would be very appreciated.

A: It is both! I was talking in part about my boyfriend at the time. Not making any specific references to anything physical in terms of him and me but making a dumb physical nod to the idea of man/woman together, maybe? I thought I was being really funny with the finger/hole reference but it seemed to go over most peoples' heads. He was from Martha's Vineyard and we were on the island in the winter and there was a heavy snow and we went to a party and I didn't really know anyone very well but he had grown up on the island with all of them and then his truck got stuck in the snow after the party and some of his friends helped him push it free. And of course I am also meaning to mention the analog to digital transition that I have lived through. The digital has really penetrated the formerly-analog world of music—my world.

11. *When I Grow Up* / generally: talk of enjoying milk chocolate, ice-cream, and such raises the question whether you are a strict vegan; or more a 'traditional' vegetarian; or a vegetarian who occasionally can't resist the crabmeat, Champagne, and Brie soup; or what?

A: Ice cream is really pretty much the only dairy I eat at this point. No meat, no fish, rarely any dairy but ice cream. I have given that up, too, at times but I start to get sort of wan when I do. I have to be really careful or I don't get the right nutrition—there's not really any vitamin B12 except in meat and eggs. I would like to be totally vegan eventually. Ice cream has so much

sugar and sugar isn't good for me. I have a compulsive relationship with sugar.

12. *When I Grow Up* / your take on selling oneself with one's appearance, plastic surgery, etc. / the film *The Shape of Things* (2003, starring Rachel Weisz and Paul Rudd): any thoughts about this film, or have you not seen it?

A: I haven't seen it but you're not the first person to mention it to me so I will try to watch it.

13. "This Lonely Love": Does "Don't take me for a woman / I am only the song you sing", and really the whole song, refer to music fans' so-called 'love' not being comparable to, or a replacement for, a one-on-one, face-to-face personal connection?

A: Not exactly. I'm saying that my own personal connections are not as deep as the connection to music/art-making. That's kind of beautiful and wondrous but sometimes it's lonely because you can't put your arms around a song. And also I'm saying that I am not as good as my music. My music is better than I am. I sometimes feel that I am a hollow shell filled with my music. And so any attempt at a connection with another human is doomed to fail.

14. Do you ever check out or even participate in discussions at places like songmeanings.net, to see what people are saying about your work?

A: I've never heard of it or been there. I really like your questions and so if the people there are as perceptive and thoughtful as you then it might be worth checking out.

15. The film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*: any thoughts about it or have you not seen it?

A: I saw it but about 20 years ago so I need to see it again. Of course I loved it. I love Sterling Hayden and Peter Sellers. All the films I saw in my early twenties are totally new to me when I watch them now. I was just talking to someone today about "Repulsion" and how I need to see it again.

It has been so long (20 yrs.?) that I don't remember many of the details. I have a terrible memory.

16. Is there any realistic scenario that gets you to play a show in the general area of New Orleans (not too much farther afield than Baton Rouge or Biloxi) in the foreseeable future (Jazz Fest or something)?

A: I doubt it.

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19. I'm perfectly willing to abide by your preferences, so regarding my possibly sharing your answers with your larger fan-base, would you like that, not care, oppose it, have differing views regarding the different questions / topics, or what?

A: Share away. Thank you for asking.

[A note about this transcript: because the questions and answers were exchanged through e-mails, their native form is a written one. For that reason, I tried to make as few edits as possible, both to avoid potentially altering the meaning and to convey the casual, conversational, sometimes stream-of-consciousness style of the responses. Ever mindful of, for example, Churchill's warning that dangling prepositions were something up with which he would not put, in a few cases, minor edits seemed to improve the clarity. Juliana—am I being rude or presumptuous to call her Juliana?—has tweeted, "Sorry- I belong to the MGM (Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts) so I can get a little militant about grammar sometimes," and "sometimes i fantasize about being a copyeditor some-day". Hopefully she will / would approve.]