

Interview:

Interview with Joan Seiler and Alex Priest; with Therese Marie Peskowits

March 22, 2022

Chicago, Illinois

Alex Priest:

Can you start by telling me a little about yourself?

Joan Seiler:

I'm a musician and artist. I do have a Band called Jon Hood. I grew up in Lucerne and I'm from Switzerland and Costa Rica.

AP:

So you grew up living in Switzerland and Costa Rica?

JS:

Well, I was born in Costa Rica and I grew up in Lucerne because I moved there when I was two years old. Since then, I have spent most of my time in Lucerne.

AP: Which came first, the art making or the music making?

JS:

First music and then...

AP:

Instrumental, vocal, or both?

JS:

I have always liked to sing and dance (since I'm a very little child). When I was 9 years old, I learned to play the guitar. I really was very lucky to have a very nice guitar teacher. His name is "Peter Wallrapp". He felt that I also would like to sing. So he encouraged me to sing while playing the guitar. And then I started writing songs, and it built up. When I was 14 years old I started to play in bands.

AP:

And learning other instruments?

JS:

Yes.

AP:

There's a couple other instruments here in your studio. Can you explain what some of these are?

JS:

Most of them are synthesizers.

AP:

Like a keyboard?

JS:

Yes, exactly. These are not very fancy keyboards, but it's fun to just play and find melodies with them. For that, they're really cool. And then we have a sampler I think, that I didn't try out. A bass synth and a bass guitar too, an electric guitar and a drum set, but this is not a real drum set.

AP:

This is the silent drum set, right?

JS:

Yes.

AP:

And so, after you learned the guitar from the teacher, did you learn the rest on your own or did you keep continuing your education formally?

JS:

When I was in middle school I picked my major subject in music. So let's say, I had to take formal singing classes and piano classes. It was very classical. Back then I did not always enjoy it, but now I think it's very good that I have had these classes. There I learned to play and sing more intentionally and precisely. Though I took all these classical and later also jazz classes I kept my playfulness and free spirit. For me there is no wrong way to sing or to play an instrument. I like to play around and love to keep things simple. You can create great pieces by doing or layering simple things. You don't necessarily have to be a virtuoso piano player or the best drummer to create nice music.

AP:

So, you were doing all this in Switzerland; how did you get to Chicago?

JS:

That's because of the Chicago and Lucerne Sister City' committee! And, of course also Lucerne provides this very big possibility to come to Chicago for four months. All two years they open the application window. It was in the newspaper: „Hey, artists, you can sign up for this residency!“ I also know some people and friends who did this residency already, and everybody was always saying so many good things about Chicago and this residency. Also for me, it was the need to change, to see something different, to get inspired by other and different energies. To get to step away from the music scene that surrounded me. And, also to refresh and reset my head and heart again.

AP:

And how long ago did you apply?

JS:

This was a really long time ago because I was one of the last of the seven artists who signed up. And then the pandemic came. I think it must have been three years ago, so I have been waiting more than two and a half years to come to Chicago.

AP:

Wow. A lot of anticipation.

JS:

Yeah. And it wasn't so clear if I could come because the borders opened right before I came. So, I had to make a very quick decision.

AP:

You're concluding your four months soon, right? In a couple of weeks or a week?

JS:

A week!

AP:

I'm very curious how you spent your time here in Chicago. What was a typical day? Was there a typical day?

JS:

It was very different every day. It's always my goal to find a routine and to get up at a certain time and to do certain things that will be really healthy for a human being, but I really don't manage to do that.

AP:

Every day my checklist includes getting up early, doing yoga.

JS:

Yes. Exactly.

AP:

Every morning I sleep in and don't do yoga.

JS:

Exactly. That's the same thing with me.

AP:

Have you been to Chicago before?

JS:

No, it's my very first time.

AP:

Did you have people or places you wanted to see when you got here?

JS:

I'm really interested in the nightlife, musicians and artists, but also just people no matter what profession, people that are living here. Like the girl who's working at the flower shop two blocks away and invited me for Christmas eve to her family's place or the young man who is working at a nice curated ceramic shop around the corner, who also creates music, reads nice poems and has recently moved to Chicago. I really like to try to feel and see how it is for people that are living here and I'm not so interested in visiting the most important buildings. I'm not the type of person who does sightseeing tours, for example. Even though I think there is a lot of historical knowledge worth knowing. If I did sightseeing I always got surprised in a positive way. But it's not what I would do first, first, I would just walk around without a plan and see what is around me.

Therese Marie Peskowits:

There is an artist network here in Chicago that knows about the visiting artists and they open their studios and their doors and their world.

JS:

Yeah.

TMP:

But, because of the pandemic that was slow to re-engage, but, that was not slow for you.

JS:

No.

TMP:

You met straight away, one of our favorite local artists, Doug Fogelson. And he gave you keys to the studio.

JS:

Yeah, that was really cool, he let me use his wonderful studio for a week and there I could play on his guitar paired with a nice and tasty selection of guitar pedals.. that was so fulfilling, it just sounded great. Doug reached out to me, he is a very kind and generous person and he does great art. I could take a nice glimpse into his work and accompanied him for example to a metal garage to pick up an art piece he gave in instruction. We also did music together which was fun. Also Carron Little, a very good and internationally appreciated performance artist, great thinker and feminist and her partner Jamie Gannon, an artist and graphic designer, who shares so much excitement for music and great and meaningful art, reached out to me. I spent a lot of time with them chatting, going out for dinner or art exhibitions.. I also met Selina Trepp, an Swiss American artist, who does visual music and shows at the moment some beautiful and very colorful art pieces on the first floor of the Cultural Center Chicago. I was very lucky and could visit and meet her in her studio at Garfield Park although she is so busy, she has great and big commissions for the future and at the moment and a lovely family.

TMP:

Does she live in Chicago?

JS:

She lives in Chicago.

TMP:

How did you meet her?

JS:

A friend and artist, Alf Hofstetter, advised me to write and meet her.

TMP:

Nice.

JS:

He was in the same art scene with Selina before she moved to Chicago. So, he told me, „Hey, I know of this person. And she makes amazing art. Maybe just write to her.“ And I wrote to her.

TMP:

You'll have to leave me her contact information to include her.

JS:

I also met musicians my age and did really cool things with them. With two of them, Andrew Morrison and Matt Engers, I even shot a music video for my band "Jon Hood" and Matt's music project "Sopha-gus".

AP:

Collaboration?

JS:

Yeah exactly! We had a couple of jam sessions together, but also with other musicians like Chris Sutter from the punk rock band "Meat Wave"

AP:

When you're new here and you're like, "I'm new" people are like, „Come here, join us.“ That's one of my favorite things about Chicago, for sure.

JS:

This is really nice. I was very surprised that it's still like this, even if there is a pandemic going on. For example, Doug was very careful during the pandemic. We were mostly wearing masks when we met. Everybody was still so friendly, open-minded and welcoming. That's so nice. I really appreciate that! People really just start to speak with you.

AP:

What do you plan on taking back from Chicago? Whether that's the people and the energy or an actual object. Are there particular things that you plan on taking back and working further on or?

TMP:

And what will you be producing in Switzerland as the conclusion of the residency? What inspired you?

JS:

I don't know yet because I did many different things and many things I did are not so easy to show. I can't really show or represent the jam sessions I had with these people because it's also very intimate and you can't reproduce them. But, I think there is some content I definitely can show. Like, for example, the music videos we just shot. For me this is very exciting, because it's something that is not only created here but also created with people from here. Maybe I can show something like that. Or, maybe, I can even try to re-create this energy in an abstract artistic way and show it.

TMP:

Any new songs?

JS:

No, I didn't write new songs. I collected many inspiring experiences, focused on making new connections and friendships. I just created ideas and energies.

AP:

Like the experiential and ephemeral moments, like you said about talking to the person at the flower shop: how do you communicate that for a show?

JS:

Yeah. Wow yes! Good question! I will have to figure this out..

AP:

That little nuance or that glimmer in someone's eye when you meet them.

JS:

To be honest, I was sometimes a little bit frustrated that I didn't write a new song. But, then I also thought, no! I can write songs later, but I can't meet all these people back home. There is something very special about Chicago and the energy of its people that I can only experience here. And I need to feel and see this as much as I can.

AP:

Was there one particular standout moment for me that you'll remember for the rest of your life?

JS:

Oh, wow.

AP:

Or, at least for a little while?

JS:

I think there were so many, everything is like a big carpet of stories now.

AP:

I love that.

JS:

Definitely the happenings that are very strong and powerful and full of energy. This residency and the whole trip was very challenging because I am a shy person.

TMP:

You've been doing great. You made friends in the first week. I was so proud of you. It was wonderful. I said, „Do you want to go out?“ And she said, „I already have plans.“

JS:

It has been a long time since I traveled to another continent and the first time I traveled so far and alone. I surprised myself and did things I never thought I would do. Some of them, I was able to do all by myself, which is very empowering. And maybe the most outstanding thing was to see that I came alone and ended up with many lovely, amazing people surrounding me.

AP:

That's great. Do you have any final thoughts on Chicago and this residency?

JS

Well, final thoughts.

TMP:

What would you miss about Chicago?

JS:

Oh, well, I will definitely miss the people. Yes. I will definitely miss the energy of the people. Also people just sitting on their stoops and "stooping."

AP:

I've never heard that word?

JS:

Never? Oh, that's funny. I think it's just about watching the neighborhood or just sort of like hanging out. Somebody told me that is stooping, like sitting on your stoop and drinking a glass of wine and watching and reading a book. And sometimes, watching people pass-by.

AP:

I like that word a lot.

JS:

Yeah. Me too. I was really, oh, cool.

AP:

I'm going to borrow it.

JS:

Yeah. Like people just saying hello, and...

TMP:

Will you miss the commute, or the sounds or the traffic or the food?

JS:

The traffic? I will not miss it. But, I think that everything is not complicated. That it's the opposite, I will miss that a lot. It's really easy to meet people, to have a nice time with them. And I will miss the food. And the nice concerts and exhibitions.

AP:

Yeah.

JS:

Yeah, you just have to go out of the door and that's really something I will miss because it has a certain lightness that I think it's not so common in Europe. Chicago is a hard city in terms of weather conditions, it can get very cold and rough, but people are still so happy somehow and very open minded. Many people say that Chicago is not that expensive, like New York or California, but still, I think it's an expensive city. I see that also people are suffering here too, even people that I met and spent time with, made music with, aren't just happy all the time, but for them it wasn't about that, they were not complaining much. These people were so present, full of curiosity, so friendly and funny. And, that's just so beautiful.

AP:

Yeah, definitely. There's just something easy about living here. When I lived in Europe, it was difficult to even wash your clothes or go to the bathroom. In Chicago, you can actually spread out. You can actually just physically move your body differently in a city like this, which I really appreciate. But, there's also this atmosphere of people here that everyone is generally nice.

JS:

Authentic.

