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Accidental Ideas: An Interview with Sara Landeau

Lindsey Eckenroth

Back in the pre-COVID times, I sat down with musician, teacher, and [The Julie Ruin](#) guitarist [Sara Landeau](#) at The Coffee Project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. We talked composing, performing, teaching, timbre, genre, CBGB, inspirations from everywhere, rockumentaries, and the inexorable challenge of knowing when it's done. The following is an approximate transcript of our sprawling conversation.

LE: To start, can you tell me about how you got into playing music, when you decided you wanted to make it your career, and how you made that happen?

SL: I thought I was going to go to art school, so I just planned to be an artist. I started playing drums at eighteen and guitar at nineteen. I got very into it ... just practiced eight hours a day. Then I went to Columbia University for art history. I also worked at CBGB as a bartender, and my band played there. We were an all-woman band; there were three of us, and we played a lot because we all worked at CBGB. At the same time, I kept studying. I went to Juilliard for a while to study classical guitar, which was great, and I just kept taking courses. Then, starting in 2005, I became a volunteer at the [Girls Rock Camp](#). I met Kathleen [Hanna] there—she was also a volunteer—and we started our band [The Julie Ruin] shortly after.¹ Kathleen and I had a lot of mutual friends from the scene, and definitely our idea of feminism was the same, plus we both liked the same music. I feel so lucky to have found a collaborator like her. Also she loves to sing and write, and I don't love to sing or write—words, that is. I don't write lyrics.



*Sara Landeau performs with The Julie Ruin in Seattle
photo by Helen Marie Fletcher*

LE: Ah, excellent. I will come back to that because I want to ask about the distribution of authorship in the band. But to follow up for a second—CBGB, were you there until the end?

SL: Yes. I was the last bartender too, with the last dollar, giving out the last PBR.

LE: Wow. So, was it ceremonial or was it just ... crazy?

SL: Patti Smith was playing. Everyone was crying. It wasn't as glamorous as you'd think; it was almost like a riot.

LE: Are you glad to have been there for that time?

Accidental Ideas (cont.)

SL: Definitely. I went to Columbia kind of late ... I didn't get my B.A. until I was in my late twenties, and I was at CBGB that whole time. There was this academic side of me, which I loved, and then there was that [CBGB] side, which is how I grew up: in a punk, working-class scene. To have that balance was really important to me, but it was also kind of confusing when CBGB closed. I never wanted to quit; this had become my new family. We're all still really close.

LE: That's so cool. But I'll stop geeking out over CBGB. When you started playing music, how were you learning?

SL: Partly by ear. I also love taking lessons, and I was always looking for female teachers. I found a female drum teacher who I stayed with forever. I never found a female guitar teacher, which is why I started teaching guitar in 2003. I said, "I'm opening my own place to teach girls and women."

LE: That's fantastic. In terms of The Julie Ruin, how do you as a band—or even just you as an individual in the band—define yourself, in terms of genre or ideology or sound ...

SL: So how we would label the band?

LE: Yeah. But you can feel free to move beyond that, because I feel like sometimes genre labels aren't necessarily suitable to capture the essence of a band, and they can be kind of demeaning or reductive.

SL: Kathleen is—I guess you know about Kathleen [Hanna]. Did you see *The Punk Singer*? Oh yeah, you work with rockumentaries, right? I wanted to ask you.

LE: I do! I definitely saw it. I have a chapter [in my dissertation] on music as labor, and I write a little bit about *The Punk Singer* [2013].

SL: What do you mean by music as labor?

LE: Well, the whole idea [for the chapter] started from me thinking about how often when you tell people who aren't musicians or artists that you do music for a living, they say, "that must be so fun! You just get to do what you love!" It's like ok yes, but also this is *work*, and I started thinking, where do these ideas come from? And to a certain extent, I think they come from rockumentaries, because these films tend to mystify the labor that went into the music, furthering the idea that making music is just this pursuit of artistic ecstasy at all times.

SL: Yes.

LE: When I watched *The Punk Singer*, the scene that really hit me is when she [Kathleen Hanna] talks about losing her voice. She describes how her voice was like a bullet, and she could always hit the target, but then suddenly she couldn't. I felt that moment really illustrated how much labor is involved in the continual vocalization night after night, especially in a touring scenario.

SL: That makes a lot of sense.

LE: I'm glad.

SL: I've watched a lot of documentaries, like the one about the Roland TR-808 drum machine [the 2005 film *808*]. I've watched tons of them. And it's always a series of talking heads. Usually, it's men talking about something. It's fantasy! And I think, I want to know how they learned to play guitar! You didn't just show up in the studio and all of a sudden you wrote the song. Why can't you tell me about all the time you spent in your basement practicing? How did you get there? Why is that part of the story so often missing?

Accidental Ideas (cont.)

LE: Totally. And what about all the things you did that didn't work?

SL: Yes. I understand music is supposed to be this magical idea for the public, but it's a series of descendants. Inspirations from everywhere. I'm the first to admit I practiced *so much*, and I still don't ever feel good enough. I get a lot of girl guitar students who say, "My boyfriend just grabs the guitar and does this," but I'm like, he doesn't tell you how he spent six hours a day in his parents' basement as a teenager working on this to impress you. That should be more told, the actual hard work that goes into becoming proficient on an instrument. I really believe in that. And demystifying that is important for people in any artistic field.

LE: Yes. And I feel like it's very connected to people's willingness to pay for music, remembering that there are working humans behind this who need to live.

SL: Absolutely. So as far as do you want to know our approach to writing the music or...?

LE: Yes...I'm sort of curious...well obviously Kathleen is incredibly associated with riot grrrl. So I wonder if you as a band still think of yourselves as part of this lineage, or if you feel departed from it, or if you are just like "People please stop referencing riot grrrl, that was thirty years ago."

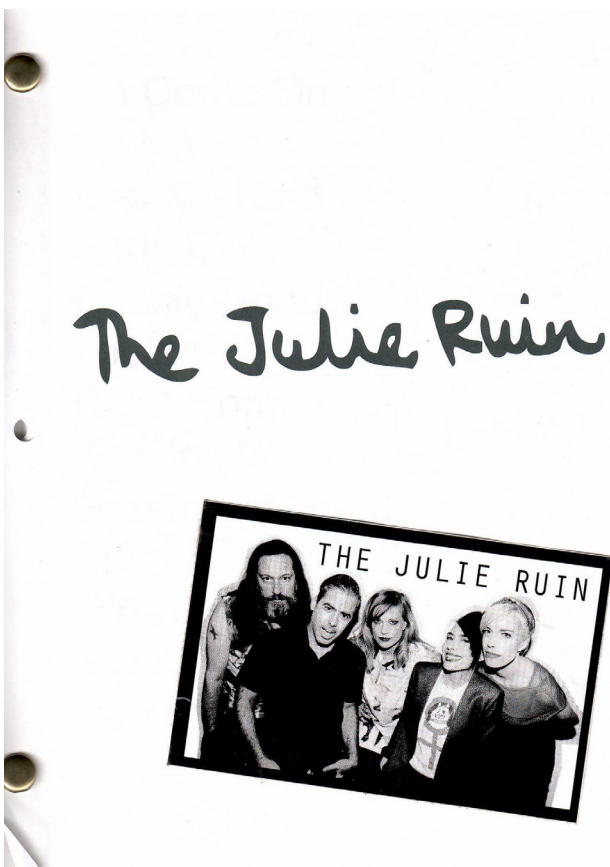
SL: That's funny, because it's a conversation we've had a lot.

LE: Really? Interesting.

SL: Well let me approach this with a little background. Our keyboardist Kenny [Mellman] was a big cabaret star. He's played Joe's Pub, Carnegie Hall ... He's huge in the cabaret world, and he's also the best piano player I've ever played with, hands down. So he comes in from a background that's conservatory trained. I can also read notation and talk theory. The rest of the band, they talk feeling, so they'll say, "Can you play that meow meow meow part again?" and that sort of thing. And then Kenny's like, "What's that?" and I'm like, "She means the minor chord." So we all come from different areas. Obviously Kenny's classically trained, and I came from more from pop/rock/jazz, and experimental guitar. I do a lot of drone stuff, work a bunch with pedals, that sort of thing. Our drummer [Carmine Covelli] comes from more of a rock background, and so does Kathi [Wilcox, bassist], who was in Bikini Kill. We wrote pretty much of the first album [*Run Fast*, 2013], and then Kathi came in on bass. She's got all these years of touring experience; she's just so solid. One thing we wanted for *Run Fast* was to write songs that were very different from one another, because we had so many influences and come from different backgrounds. In terms of composition, I'm always thinking, you don't want to completely compose something that doesn't relate to anybody. So you need to find, I guess you might say in academia, cultural signifiers.

LE: In terms of genre, inspirations, things like that?

SL: Yes. We have some things that we'll never let go. I always have some distortion on my guitar, and Kenny



Front cover of Sara Landeau's Julie Ruin notebook

Accidental Ideas (cont.)

always has a little bit of cabaret, and Kathleen has a mission. These things make a band. In the end, there's always going to be dance and punk, because we all come from that. So it's very hard to label it because we're all huge music fans with diverse interests. When you're there with five people collaborating, and we all get so excited about so much music, it's really hard to narrow down. I'd say punk and dance are central, but it's also not just that ...

LE: That makes so much sense. In the end, I always come back to genres being problems, because music is rarely just one thing. There's so much in The Julie Ruin's music ... it's definitely dancey, then there are these more experimental electronic moments, but it's also punkey. Kathleen's vocals have always struck me as very punk just because she's so declamatory. Also her voice is aging in the best way!

SL: I agree!

LE: I hope she knows that. It's so good.

SL: I love her voice. In fact when I first met her—I can't remember who we were playing with—but I said, "Your punk voice is my favorite punk voice." There are a lot of punk voices that are great, like Debbie Harry; she was a big idol for me when I was younger. I also like bands like The Raincoats, X-Ray Spex ... I was a big fan of those kinds of vocals. But there's something about Kathleen's voice that's perfect. I thought, you're exactly who I want to work with.

LE: Absolutely. More specifically, about your guitar sound in the context of The Julie Ruin: do you think a lot about it works with Kathleen's voice? Because there are times when the melding of those really strikes me, like on ["Planet You."](#) You have a solo on that track, and the timbre matches so perfectly with her voice.

SL: That's funny you said that song, because that one we particularly wanted to do that way.

LE: Oh wow. So could you maybe talk a bit about the songwriting process, and when decisions like that would come into play?

SL: Sure. When we started up as a band, everyone was so busy. We developed this method where we'd put samples of stuff we'd write, or snippets of things, into Dropbox. They were all .wav files. I put tons in! A lot of them we didn't end up using. Sometimes I'd write a bassline and guitar part, play them together, and just put them in there. Or I'd be bored playing around and suddenly do something I liked, so I'd throw it in. Then as a band we'd go through them, like, "Ok let's try something with that one." For example, there's a song where Kathleen really liked the beat. So she messed with it and then the time signature got really weird, and she sent it to us and the drummer was like, "I don't want to play that!" But I said, "No I see where we're going..." So there is a lot of working with mistakes and then turning them into songs. I would say almost all of our songs are written that way, with accidental ideas.

Also a lot of it was generated electronically. One of us would make some loops, we'd play them back in the studio, and then we would recreate them acoustically. The original would be this little electronic thing that someone did at home on MIDI, and when we recreate it acoustically, it grows into 3D. It's crazy how that can work. Then the sounds obviously shift; a guitar string is going to sound different than a MIDI, and an acoustic drum kit has really made the difference, especially compared to Kathleen's older band Le Tigre. So yeah, inputting all of these electronic pieces and turning them into live acoustic sounds.

Dropbox is a fabulous thing because you can be anywhere in the world and you can go through and listen, make alterations, and then everyone shows up to rehearsal ready. We're a Dropbox band, which is weird to say.

LE: But it makes sense to me from what you're describing, how you started with these discrete ideas and then worked on how to layer them.

SL: Another big thing is that we have different approaches; a guitarist writes differently than a keyboardist. So, Kenny will say flats, I will say sharps, and our harmonies are completely different. So that made the songs interesting too, because we'd write a lot of parts together.

SL: Right. And a good tension, because I'll play something, and Kenny will say, "Whoa, I've never thought about that."

SL: Yes, they all have nicknames.

SL: Well, there were always some kinda surf songs, so it'd be "surf song 1," "surf song 2"... there was "Devo song," when we were working on a kind of Devo-esque thing. Some of them have crazy names. But what would usually happen was, we'd record our practice, because a week later we don't remember what we did. Then during the week, Kathleen listens to the recording and writes words over it.

SL: Yes.

SL: It works for everyone, because it turns into: the Dropbox snippets—sketches, we'd often call them—get turned into a three-to-five minute thing, and we do a bunch of them, and then Kathleen takes the recordings home and says, "This one, I feel this over this."

SL: She's come back with melodies that I *in a million years* would never have thought to put over what we recorded. It's amazing. There was one track where I thought, "I have no idea what we're going to do with this," and she came back with something so far beyond my expectations; that was for "Mr. So-and-So."

SL: Yes, it's funny. [The video](#), too.

Decide

You may be a bit outrageous
And I might scream with anticipation
But I, I, I, I, I, I'll Decide

And I might make mistakes and chances
Even when I'm at a disadvantage
But I, I, I, I, I, I'll Decide

And who can be nananana Cartoon Cathy's nananana
TNT nananana The new OB nananana

You may be a thorn I witnessed
or a pain I need to co-exist with
But I, I, I, I, I, I'll Decide

She might say a combination of words
I view with irritation but
I, I, I, I, I, I'll Decide

Long Musical break

And who can be nananana Cartoon Cathy's nananana
TNT nananana the new OB nananana

(new rhythm/alt part)
I belong to the wolves who drug me
From their cave to the raft by the sea x4
I-----I'll decide
I-----I'll decide

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Accidental Ideas (cont.)

SL: Completely. In terms of lyrics: Kenny wrote some lyrics on what he sings. So I'd say most of the lyrics are Kathleen, with some from Kenny. Kathy and I sing back-up sometimes, but I've never written any lyrics.

LE: And it sounds like you prefer it that way.

SL: Yes. I always want to be like the producer, the sound person. I like being a musician; I'm totally too shy to sing. Back-up singing is fun though. With that, I'm fine. It seems like every time I tell someone I'm a musician, they think I'm a singer.

LE: Ugh. Such a gendered assumption.

SL: It is. I like the textures, and I love guitar pedals and nerding out with that forever, and composing, and doing experimental electronic music; I'm just really happy with that.

LE: I'm curious about how you as a band talk about timbre, because I feel like it escapes language in a lot of ways. What kinds of words or phrases do you use ... like when you said before about referring to the "meow meow meow part ..."

SL: [Laughs] That is part of our language, definitely; we all say "the meow meow meow part." I think timbre is everything, and lately I've been obsessed with it, probably from learning more about electronic music and how to build sound installations. I know everything comes together, but timbre is the emotion. In composing in the rehearsal room, I think the sounds are equally important to the forms, and to the message. There is definitely a nod to nostalgia in everything we do, but we don't want to be time-stamped; we'd like to avoid ephemeral fads that could stereotype the results. At the same time we love dance and punk music, but we have tried very hard to create a new sound. Creating a new guitar sound is my goal, but it's a work in progress. You never feel it's done.

LE: In terms of completion then, how do you find the moment when the song is done?

SL: That's where my problem is; it's very hard to finish music. Whether I'm doing something with the band or for a film or just for myself, I never feel that it's done.

LE: I feel the same way about my writing. Like, when is my writing done? It's when I've hit the deadline, or when it gets published.

SL: Right!

LE: So for you, there's a moment in the studio?

SL: Yes, that's pretty much it. Kathleen has a helpful way of saying, "It's done." I will keep composing until someone stops me, but she is able to say, "We're moving on, we're putting this on the album." To have someone who can do that is so important in collaborations. Do you have someone like that in your life?

LE: My whole life it's always been deadlines, held by various people. Especially now that I have publications ... invariably it'll be the minute before it's due and there I am tweaking that same freaking sentence. That's my nature and I try to accept it. And there's something comforting about working under pressure; you're held by this knowledge that it ends right over here.

SL: I totally agree. Some people are very successful not needing that, making self-imposed deadlines. But obviously you call up a mixing and mastering service, you go in and you have to be ready, and then it's done. But listening back, I always think "Ah I want to change this one thing."

Accidental Ideas (cont.)

LE: Totally. Do you ever do that in live performance? Do you tend to deviate from the recorded versions, or is it pretty straight?

SL: It's pretty straight, at least for me. We try to let Kathleen do whatever she wants.

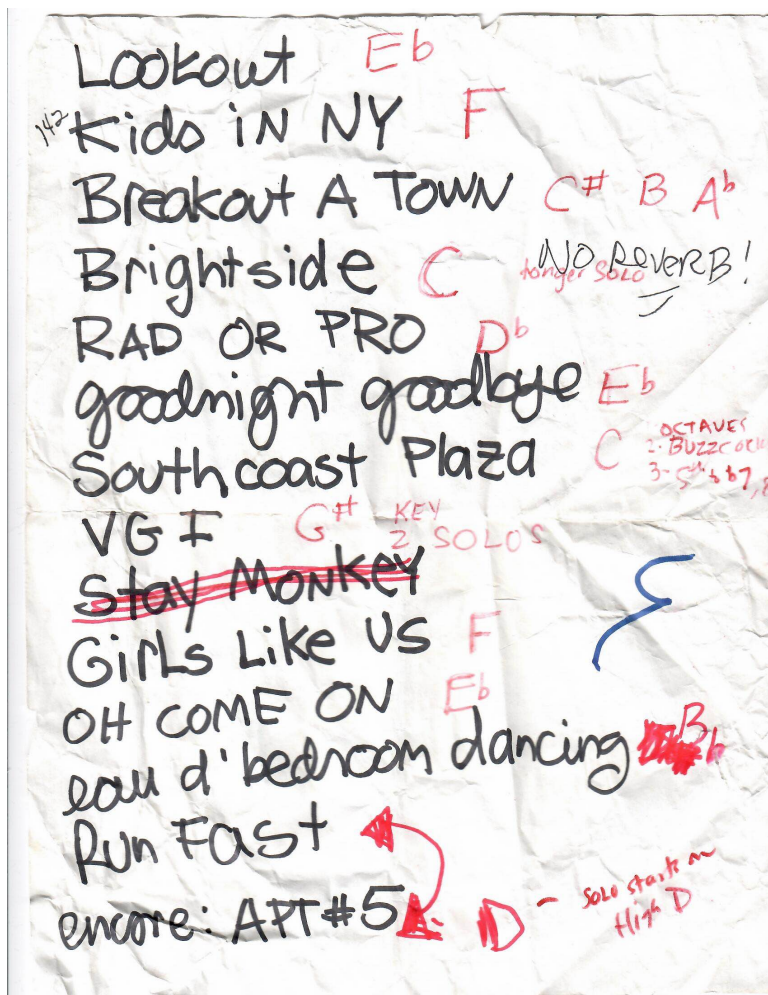
LE: Ah. You all remain consistent so that Kathleen feels like she has the support to experiment?

SL: Right. I would call that, in musical terms, foreground in motion. So sounds are the timbre, the harmony, the timing, and then I feel like our motion is in the foreground. The guitar and the keyboard are too, but I want her to have the freedom to go off. Although there are a couple songs where I'll improvise, because I know she's good.

LE: Back to composition, do you notate anything for yourself, or does the band collectively write anything down?

SL: I write down everything. When I handwrite, it helps me remember. And Kathleen writes everything down with colored markers. You could make an exhibit of these set lists because they're all like different colors ... she's very visual person. In fact, all of us except for Kenny went to art school, so there's definitely a visual component. But as far as "real" notation, not in this band; it almost looks like hieroglyphics.

LE: That's so cool. Is what's written mutually intelligible by multiple members?



The Julie Ruin setlist in progress

SL: No way would anybody be able to read mine! I do a lot of guitar tab really fast. I'll write out the tab and then the rhythms and everything, because I love notation. Maybe that's weird in the punk world, but I really love writing things down.

LE: Well, notation is beautiful! It sounds like writing things down is partially memory-oriented and partially an aesthetic practice for you then.

SL: Exactly. But you know, it would have been different twenty years ago. Now it's so easy to record with your phone. My first band, Chiclets—we just had a tape recorder in the middle of the room for rehearsal. We'd have to put it in a cassette, record, and that's all we had. It was one tape, so we couldn't all go home and listen to it.

LE: [Laughs] Right! So this was the CBGB-era band?

SL: Right.

LE: Turning quickly to gender: how much do you feel like the specter of rock's masculinity impacts either you or your private guitar students?

SL: I feel that I live in a bubble, because I work with a lot of girls and women, and within a queer scene where it's not an issue. But then I go on tour and I'm like, "Oh yeah, I forgot, it's a bigger world." Europe

Accidental Ideas (cont.)

has been great. Australia, too ... maybe the bubble came with us, I don't know. But in some of America I feel there's still an antiquated question of, why are women being loud? I'm a soft-spoken girl, but I think my alter ego is very loud. I'm from the Midwest, and I've found that some people there have a hard time understanding the loudness; that's a situation that came up on the West Coast, too.

But also regarding the masculinity question, I feel like it's dying out. I do feel there are not enough women in audio, though. When I've talked to most female musicians, they try to record their music and it doesn't come out the way they want. That's part of the reason I've gotten into recording, to help produce and say, "This is your vision." We've just gotta keep on pushing, because it's unfamiliar territory. There are a lot more female drummers, which I'm really excited about. When I started on drums I felt like people would be super surprised, and then now it doesn't feel that way. At least for me.



*The Julie Ruin performing at Irving Plaza (left to right: Kenny Mellman, Sara Landeau, Carmine Covelli, Kathleen Hanna)
photo by Helen Marie Fletcher*

LE: I feel like, at least in the pop/rock world, drums are the last frontier in terms of the exclusive gendering of instruments. It makes me think of that rockumentary *Hit So Hard* [2011], which does a great job of constructing a historical lineage of female drummers.

SL: Yes!

LE: So, in conclusion, a fun question: what are some of your most memorable or best performance experiences?

SL: There are so many! I got to open for The Raincoats solo at The Kitchen, and I would say that was the best of night of my life. I played just with pedals, one song that I wrote about them. Right after me Bikini Kill did a secret show, the very first one announcing they were coming back. Then The Raincoats played, and they were so good.

LE: That's amazing! What about memorable Julie Ruin shows?

SL: There were some great shows in California. There was one, and there was this all-teenage-girl mosh pit, which was incredible to watch. The only man there was like maybe a guy in the back. My joke was that it was someone's boyfriend, and he was there just so the girl could hand him her glasses and be like, "I'm going in!" These girls were tearing it up. Another favorite was a show we played in Tasmania, because I never thought I would go there in my life. We were facing the mountains and on no sleep ... my band doesn't even remember the show because they were so tired. But to me, it was almost like I was on acid, just thinking, "I can't believe I'm here."

LE: That sounds fabulous. Well, on that note, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me, and for your music!

Notes

1. [Kathleen Hanna](#) is a NYC-based musician and artist. She is well-known for the major role she played in the formation of the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s and as a member of the punk band Bikini Kill. Prior to her work with The Julie Ruin, Hanna also released a solo album (1997, under the name Julie Ruin) and was a member of the electronic rock/punk band Le Tigre, which released three albums between 1999 and 2004.