Bold & Creative Conversations with Isabel Cout
Bells Larsen

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Isabel:
Welcome, Bells. Would you start us off by introducing yourself?

Bells:
For sure. My name is Bells Larsen and I am a singer-songwriter, performer, and musician. That's always my go-to for telling people who I am and what I'm about, but I'm also interested in defining myself through other means and avenues, so I guess for today I'll also say I'm a community member.

Isabel:
What does that mean to you?

Bells:
You and I were just talking about people who wear many hats in their lives, and I was just thinking about all of the different hats that I have worn that have led me to where I am now… And a lot of them have nothing to do with music and actually a lot more to do with community work.

In my university days, I did a lot of peer support work and always knew that I wanted to work with people in some capacity. After moving to Montreal, I fulfilled my dream of working with people. From 2022 up until March of 2025, I was an educator for a non-profit where I was teaching intervention workers and at-risk populations about Hepatitis C.

Isabel:
It's interesting that you want to define yourself more expansively.

Bells:
I think that's something that I'm wrestling with right now. What does music mean to me? How does music serve as a tool of expression when it is also my profession and something I have to commodify to make my living?

I really need to ensure that I'm compartmentalizing myself or else I will feel very alienated from music. There have been many times since I've been pursuing music professionally where I have felt profoundly alienated from my practice. I think it has been crucial to have other things in my life, other ways of making money or passing my time that still feel fulfilling.

Isabel:
How did your decision to leave your non-profit job dovetail with your music career?

Bells:
Shortly after putting out my first record, *Good Grief* (2022), I sought out non-profit work because I really needed to separate my self-worth from my music. I was finding the music industry to be very toxic.

My boss at the time was very accommodating in letting me take some time off each year to travel for music. In 2023, for example, I went to SXSW and to Los Angeles. In 2024, I took an entire month off to do a residency with the PHI Centre and then go on tour with Land of Talk.

I was leading this Hannah-Montana type-lifestyle working my nine to five and then coming home, writing grants or music or making TikToks. Behind the scenes I was really trying to build my career in a slow and steady way where I could also support myself. That involved writing and recording my second album, *Blurring Time* (2025), mixing and mastering it, finding a new label, filming music videos, etc. It got to a point where it was too much music. I got offered a tour from a musician I really like, Hannah Georgas, so I gave my notice, we trained my replacement, and then I left on tour.

My plan was to do full-time music for maybe three months four months and then find a serving job, but my life has been so busy that I have not actually needed to find another job yet…

Isabel:
Do you want to talk a bit about *Blurring Time*? It opened all these doors for you professionally to get your sound out there, and at the same time, the US tour you were forced to cancel led to all these conversations about how politics and music intersect.

Bells:
So, I like to say that *Blurring Time* is my record that marries the past and the present. It documents my transition in real time. Chronologically, the track list is essentially telling the tale of me figuring out that I'm trans, and what that means for me. The first song/title track takes place in my apartment on Parc Avenue in 2021 as I explored what it would mean to not just define myself through negatives. The last song, "Might," talks about my understanding that to be my authentic self, I would need to pursue hormone replacement therapy in the form of testosterone, which would deepen my voice and masculinize me, etc.

By the time I'd finished writing the record, I knew what I needed to do in my personal life but that led to all sorts of questions in my professional life. I didn't know if I wanted to capture this project with a high voice (my pre-transition alto voice) and then transition, and have there be a discrepancy between what the recording sounded like and what my voice sounded live… The other option was to transition immediately, wait out the changes to my voice, and then sing these songs with a lower voice, but almost in retrospect.

Then I considered that it could be interesting to do both. If I was going to transition regardless, maybe it would make sense to make a project out of it. Which is not to say that my transition is an art project, but rather that I wanted to find a creative way to create a time capsule for myself that would document my experiences.

I recorded the high vocals in January or February of 2022. I started testosterone in March of 2022. It took about six months for my voice to drop. During that time, I promoted my first album, and tried to write with a descending voice. In June of 2023, I recorded my lower vocals with the help of my friend Georgia Harmer, who helped me arrange harmonies and octaves for my new voice.

The project itself really is me singing with myself about change.

Isabel:
What was it like to relearn your instrument, and experience your voice – something so intimate – as strange, new and foreign after so many years of expressing yourself as a singer?

Bells:
It's very vulnerable. One of the things that confirmed for me that I needed to pursue [HRT] was messing around on TikTok in late 2021. I put a lowering filter on my voice, which was really warped and exaggerated, but I still heard it and felt like *Oh man, this is me and I need to do this.*

Yeah, it's totally awkward and strange sometimes. I had a vocal teacher who helped me around the one-year mark of testosterone while I was preparing to do the lower vocals on *Blurring Time*, and she said something that has always really resonated with me. She said that my voice is like an accordion, and some days my range will be quite large and some days my range will be quite small and that's okay. The important thing is just to keep singing through it all.

My range has changed drastically. When I'm songwriting these days, I feel like I'm existing in a different cinematic universe than before. It has gotten easier, but I still find harmonies to be a little challenging. And I find live singing in the context of a show to be quite challenging because my voice is so low it will very often get lost in the mix.

I'm at a point right now where I have a bit of time off to write my next project and just really try to hone in on my live sound. I'm really trying to take the time to learn how to actually use in-ear monitors so that I can hear myself properly.

Isabel:
It’s interesting to think about all of the practical and technical effects of transition on how the body interacts with objects, structures, technologies and routines. Did you have to rethink how you structured your performances, your setup, and your collaborations?

Bells:
I didn't tour before my voice dropped. My first real performance that I consider part of my professional career was in March of 2022, a week before I started testosterone. I was very much learning on the fly and just doing everything as it came.

There was a period where with every show, the songs would migrate into a lower and lower key which was really confusing. I'm very thankful for the musicians who can fly by the seat of their pants and adapt with me. They’re very kind and gracious with their time and energy.

Isabel:
Who are some of the people in the industry that have inspired and supported you throughout this process of transformation in your personal and professional life?

Bells:
The first person that comes to mind is my label manager at Royal Mountain Records, Conor Mackie. He is a musician himself. The reason he comes to mind is his kindness and honesty. He shows that you can be kind and honest without “tough love.”

The more time I spend in this industry, the more I realize that it's a shit show. People have no communication skills and are not leading with love. Conor is one of the only people I've met that is in it for the right reasons. He's a genuine music fan who wants the things he loves and believes in to succeed. He was really in my corner when all the stuff went down with my visa application.

I'm so inspired by the musician Arielle Soucy. She is one of my absolute favourite discoveries of the last few years. She and I played a showcase festival together in 2023.

The inside joke among musicians is that showcase festivals objectively suck. It's full of industry people that are talking over you and are just there to judge. There isn't a lot of sincerity. It's all twenty minute sets with no sound check.

The most beautiful thing that has ever come from a showcase has been discovering Arielle. I was just completely blown away and awestruck by her from the first note. She sings in English and French about a lot of big life stuff, like grief and existentialism.

I just had the pleasure of being in her band for these Christmas shows all across Quebec. It was really inspiring to be in someone else's band and watch how someone else runs their ship.

Isabel:
What is your experience like being a non-Quebecois, non-Francophone musician in Quebec? I know you speak French and make an effort to sing and write in French.

Bells:
My label is in Toronto, but I've put out two albums since I've been a Montrealer. With the first one, I did not really see any reception from Quebec, whether Francophone or Anglophone. But with my second project, there was more interest because I have two songs on *Blurring Time* in French that I wrote as love songs for my partner at the time, who is Francophone.

Through recording, mixing, and mastering predominantly in Montreal, I made connections with sound engineers and musicians here. It was mostly through the press cycle for *Blurring Time* that I found my way into the Quebecois music scene.

The most interesting thing I found was that once you're in, you're really in. It's quite hard to break in as an Anglophone musician not from Montreal. But as someone who cares so much for the culture in Montreal, who thinks it's beautiful and really thriving, I feel really welcomed and championed by the music community. And I think there's also something kind of cute about an Anglophone who's just doing his best speaking French in interviews. I think that the big thing that changed the game for me was going on *Tout le monde en parle.*

It's really interesting to see the way my audience demographic is different in Quebec versus everywhere else in the world. Elsewhere, the people who come to my shows and who listen to my music are mostly between the ages of 18 to 35, and predominantly women and queer people. In Quebec, the people who come to my shows and listen to my music are predominantly Francophone, and the age demographics are much more varied. And I think that is because of *Tout le monde en parle.* It's such an interesting contrast, going from being relatively unknown to then being very welcomed into these Francophone spaces and recognized in public.

Isabel:
Do you feel like your Francophone audiences are very generous and hospitable with you in navigating performing and existing as a multilingual artist?

Bells:
Oh yeah. I like to ask at my shows in Quebec what percentage of the audience is Francophone, and then I know what language to conduct my stage banter in. I have found French audiences very accepting of the fact that most of my music is in English, but I always try to sing my French songs because I like them and they're good and where better to do that than in Quebec!

Isabel:
Since you have a relatively young audience, I wanted to ask about how TikTok and online life has affected your journey as a musician. I'm curious about what it feels like to be a content creator for you, because I think we sometimes imagine that social media cheapens things in some way, or is only a venue for exploring shallow things. I know your music as something that has lots of weight and reflection behind it, and I also know that TikTok is an important tool for you. What is it like having to create content to get yourself out there?

Bells:
That's a great question. I am at a point now at the beginning of 2026 where I'm really trying to not give it so much weight. I like to see it as something that I don't *need* to use, but rather just a tool at my disposal that I can choose to use or not.

In 2022 and 2023, years when I did not have an audience, I was mostly just trying things out to see what stuck. My online presence felt intrinsically tied to my self-worth. If I didn't get views or comments, it felt like a direct reflection of my value as a songwriter or my value as a person. Since I do sing and write about the things I experience, whether that's grief or identity or change or heartbreak, there's been a lot of trial and tribulation around detaching myself and my self-worth from social media.

Now, I'm very fortunate in that I feel like I have an audience that will listen regardless of whether I post or not. And that means that I now see social media, quite frankly, as a tool to just further my career and loop in new people or places.

I have the privilege of seeing it as something beneficial, something that has to be used in moderation. I wouldn't have social media if it weren't for music. But social media has, in many ways, given me a career. It's complicated. It's a poison and a medicine.

I'm writing for the first time in like two years, and I think it's really fun to post snippets of what I'm doing, and to keep posting covers because that's just an easy way to feed the algorithm and keep engagement going.

Isabel:
Blurring Time is an album structured around a central concept, and *Good Grief*, too, reflects on some core life experiences and therefore also has a kind of conceptual structure to it as well. Will you continue in that vein for the album you're working on now?

Bells:

I think my dream for this next album that I'm writing is to have it be limitless and not restricted to any specific boundaries, rules or concepts, actually.

I feel that a talking point for me in many of my interviews in the last year has been that there's freedom within limitations. When you create those conceptual structures, it's almost easier to know what is okay and what isn't okay. I feel that has been a guideline for me in my past projects, where I'm writing about grief or identity, and I know what to stick to and what to talk about. Obviously with *Blurring Time*, the limitation was present both in the subject matter and the concept for the technical aspect of the recorded material.

Now I'm curious to see what my music looks like when I'm not in the depths of tragedy or in the midst of becoming. Who am I when the dust settles?

And to that point, I think that as a marginalized person who has really paved their own way in this industry without many connections or nepotism or money, I'm often asking myself what seat I occupy at "the table"… I don't regret anything and I'm so proud of the work I've put out. But I also think that defining myself through my concept albums has been my "in" and has earned me my seat at the table. And that's hard because I there's a voice in my head that truly believes that me showing up as I am with whatever I make is not enough, and that I have to show up with a really strong concept and say: "I am Bells, I am grief – this is my thing," or "I am Bells, I am transition," and that makes me sad.

I am someone who struggles with self-worth issues, so I think those will be questions I'll be asking myself for the rest of my life. But I'm also in an industry that forces you to feel like you're not enough, especially when you're in a sea of cis or straight people, because this industry proves itself to be transphobic time and time again.

So, I'm curious. It's my dream to make a record of songs that are just songs, which will ultimately include grief and transition and identity by virtue of the fact that I am a trans person. It's just part of who I am, but I don't need to define myself exclusively through heavy life experiences. This album will have love songs, and it will have breakup songs -- it will have a bit of everything. And I find that really stressful but also really interesting, because that's what most albums really are… So, in that way, I almost feel like this will be my first album.

Isabel:
You received a lot of attention from the press about being denied a visa to the US because you are trans, and all of that press is great to raise awareness and tell that story, but you have a lot of stories to tell… And hopefully that interest is sincerely in your music beyond "visa-gate," as you call it.

Bells:
In my interview with Tom Power for *Q*, I said that I felt in some ways like I was a bit of a trans Katniss Everdeen [from *The Hunger Games*] and it was confusing. I felt a large sense of responsibility because I was this mouthpiece for something way larger than myself. I felt very proud and privileged to be able to do that. I recognize that I'm a pretty palatable trans person, being small, white and trans-masc[uline], and I know that people are more likely to listen to me because of that. So, I felt a responsibility to name the issues that are going on in the world because other people are not able to, but also, at the same time, I have an album to promote.

I’m not a political figure, though I became inadvertently politicized - and the music that I write is political because existing *openly* and *radically* and *happily* as a trans person in this day and age is political - but at the end of the day, I am a musician who just wants to sing songs about love and change and identity, all of which are universal themes.

It has been really confusing to know which proverbial hat I am wearing when, like the political hat or the musician hat. I’m good at wearing multiple hats, but my favourite hat is the one where I’m just talking about my craft and the thing I'm really good at.

There were times earlier last year when someone would ask me about my artistic process, and I was almost caught off guard because I felt so on autopilot and used to talking about legislation and the US. It felt like it didn’t come up often in interviews, and I have to get used to talking about it again.

Now I'm at a point where I see and believe and understand that I do have people who listen to my music and who are in it for the right reasons, who have stuck around and are dedicated and interested and want to follow along. Everything that happened last year is certainly confusing and it's part of my story but it's not the whole story.

Isabel:
Thanks so much for sharing these reflections, and for offering your time.

Bells:
Thanks for having me!