

# “Organic and Beautiful and Imperfect”: An Interview with Queer Pop Musician Be Steadwell

Seth Mulliken

Be Steadwell is a musician from Washington, DC. She has self-produced six albums, the most recent of which is entitled *Jaded. dark love songs*. She has toured the US and Europe, and was recently selected to a 2016 Strathmore Artist in Residence. As a touring musician, she plays shows of her music, and also offers songwriting workshops. “Songwriting doesn’t need to be inaccessible,” she says. In addition to her musical work, she is also a filmmaker. Her recently completed short, *Vow of Silence*, has played in festivals both nationally and internationally.

Be makes music in a few different modes: she sings with a band and backing vocalists, she collaborates in small groups, and she makes solo music. In each of these modes, Be uses a technique she calls “vocal layering.” This is most striking in her solo music. Using her voice, she’ll create harmonies, counterpoint lines, drones, riffs, and beatbox sounds, and finally adds her own lead vocal. This is a technique that is a product of necessity: “My voice is the instrument I know best,” she says. But it is also by design. “Humans connect to voice,” she offers. In her home studio, she uses Logic Pro software to multi-track herself, sometimes adding instruments, both live and synthetic sounds from the computer. When she performs live, she uses a loop pedal, a device that allows her to sing and record a short section of music, loop it, and record another over it.

When I first heard Be’s music, I was struck by the sound of it. She uses her voice in multiple ways, to deliver lyrics, to create harmony and counterpoint, and to add texture. Her use of musical sound creates an ambience, a “mood” as she calls it, that seeks to deliver the listener to a new space. Given the prominent place of modern music production technologies, the loop pedal and computer-based editing, it was tempting for me to frame Be’s music as “highly technologized.” By this, I mean the ways music is primarily heard and discussed through the discourse of its machines and technological processes. However, Be’s relationship to the music production technologies doesn’t prioritize the machines and technological processes over other processes. Her music is not framed solely or primarily by its technologized aspects; rather, the technology she uses is part of her larger project that seeks to unite the producer, the audience, the “human,” and the technology in the music-making process.

“I’m not excited about tech stuff,” Be says. Which is not to say she doesn’t have a sophisticated and rigorous understanding of the technology she uses. On her YouTube channel, the video “Worthy by Be Steadwell” shows her music production process in action. She sings into her microphone then hits the switch on a book-sized red box. With each press of the button, she records another piece to the song, building up the song. By the one-minute mark, she’s built a chorus of sounds, voices, and beatboxing.

Be’s stated lack of excitement about music technology implies a much more complicated idea: the idea that highly technologized music doesn’t need to follow a single narrative line of its creation. As a Queer Black woman making music, Be enacts her art within a complex web of intersecting pressures of race and gender. Drawing on the work of Tara Rodgers and Alexander Weheliye, we can hear Be’s use of musical technologies as a negotiation with a very specific set of gendered and racialized ideas about technologies of sound production.

In her book *Pink Noises*, Tara Rodgers says, “the terms technology and music are often marked as male domains, and the trenchancy of associated gendered stereotypes seems to gain force when these fields converge in electronic music” (Rodgers 2010, 2). This is marked by the erasure of women’s contributions to the history of innovation in electronic music. In her interview with the members of the band Le Tigre, the idea of what constitutes “innovation” with music technology is highly gendered. “When women do it... it’s not considered an artistic innovation or statement” says Johanna Fateman of Le Tigre (7).

One of the themes in Rodgers’s book is the idea that electronic music, and highly technologized music in general, must follow a particular narrative line to be considered sophisticated and innovative. This narrative centralizes the use of the technology as precise and crucial to the hearing of the music, celebrates the technology as emblematic of the modern, and often reduces the role of the composer, having the result of negating the importance of identity (Rodgers 2010, 10). Be’s use of technology in her music seeks to include what is left out of this narrative. She engages with her audiences, brings her personal stories into the performance, and invites her audience to engage in the process of music-making with her. In her words, this is bringing the new and old together.

In Alexander Weheliye’s book *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, he emphasizes the contrast between white and Black uses of technologies. Citing Samuel R. Delany’s distinction between the “white boxes of computer technology” and the “black boxes of street technology,” Weheliye notes how “the former... are deemed crucial to the technovanguard of a continually progressing machine, while the latter – sound

technologies for instance—are not regarded as technological at all” (2005, 2). Weheliye says that popular music is a realm “which Black subjects have engaged in these techniformal flows” (3). Pop is crucial in Be’s music, as part of her own negotiation with the history of Black creative work in popular music. The importance of technique in Be’s work reflects her desire to recognize the importance of Black creativity in popular music, and also to push against the genre limits of Black music production.

This interview with Be was conducted over Skype. As a personal suggestion, I’d highly recommend visiting Be’s bandcamp page and listening to her album *Jaded. dark love songs.* while you read.

## Beginnings

**Seth Mulliken:** How did you get started making music?

**Be Steadwell:** I grew up loving music and loving to sing, but it was definitely a private thing to me. I was kind of shy so it wasn’t like I was a little Broadway kid singing everywhere. In high school I started singing in the jazz band and then in college I was singing in the acapella groups. I had been writing music in high school but I really didn’t start writing consistently until after college. I was depressed, and it was one thing that always made me happy. On my days off I would write songs and make goofy music videos. I would work really hard on them. It wasn’t as if I was trying to be a musician, it was just therapeutic and fun. It just felt crafty, like a hobby.

You know, I never said, “I’m going to be a musician,” because [it’s] like the most cliché foolish thing that people say. I still think it’s crazy.

**SM:** Even now that you’re doing it.

**BS:** Right, right. It really is insane. I mean, it doesn’t make any sense.

**SM:** You were writing songs in high school, what does that mean? What were you using to do that?

**BS:** My folks, my parents, signed me up for this writing camp. I applied for poetry and they put me in songwriting. I don’t know why they just assumed it was going to work out. They threw me in there. And it was great. I played a little guitar, but I didn’t play any instrument well. At the camp, you wrote songs and the songwriting instructors would facilitate you recording tracks. That was like my first experience recording. It wasn’t like a recording studio. It was a computer and a nice mic. I just wrote a few songs at this camp. I liked them, they were cute. But just, you know, a blip.

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**SM:** After college, you kept making music?

**BS:** I was writing music after college with a high school friend of mine and we were doing this hip-hop duo thing as The Lost Bois. I don't know what we expected. I think we just wanted to meet girls. But that sort of got me more in the zone of "there is an audience and there are people who are listening to this. And enjoying it. Maybe I could actually keep doing this and play shows and it could be something other than just for me." We started getting gigs and getting paid a little bit for it. Because we were kind of goofy and silly and different, college kids started liking it and it felt like this tiny burst of audience, popularity, whatever.

**SM:** You mention you're getting gigs because you were goofy and silly. Was there also something about women being a rap duo?

**BS:** Yeah, maybe. If you think about the typical woman in rap, the Femme-C, there are a lot of stereotypes and patterns that show up. There are women who are really hardcore, there are women who are really sexy and doing their sexy thing, and then there's queer women who are essentially reproducing the same heteronormative narrative in their music: being assholes to women and being disrespectful. Our work felt special because we were denying the assumption that to be a rapper you have to be like this unreal, cocky persona. When we went on stage we were awkward people. "I'm a little insecure sometimes and I'm on stage and I'm rapping." That's what felt different for me. It wasn't a persona; it was pretty much just us being us. We tried to be cool. Sometimes it worked, but sometimes it didn't. But then my friend got a real job and had less time. The group was my outlet. I said to myself, "okay, you actually have to do this on your own. You can't wait for other people."

**SM:** How do you name, genre-wise, the work you do now?

**BS:** I've been calling it "queer pop." It's important for me to own the word "pop" because I feel like everybody deserves pop that they can relate to and that makes them feel good.

Because being queer, a song where a woman is talking to a woman is exciting. I don't have that many of those songs in my life, and it's exciting and I identify with it. And pop is what kind of music I write. Its earnest, simple, and for the most part I say exactly what I mean. I definitely think about Michael Jackson, I think about Prince, and I think about Sade. Because they all use elements of many genres, but don't really align myself with any particular artist. I just know that I love them. And I love that they are people of color making music that folks internationally appreciated and

loved and will continue to love. Even though what they did was different in their own way it's still just very pop. And people feel like it's such a dirty word, "pop" like it's so gross. But thinking about Michael Jackson. What are you going to say about that, right? Brilliant music, brilliant performance, entertaining: that's pop.

I'm getting some guidance from musicians, from older musicians who tell me that "queer" is limiting and some people get turned off by the word, which makes sense. So now I'm starting to sometimes call my work "pop & soul." I guess it depends on who's asking. I wouldn't say "queer pop" to somebody who didn't seem to know what "queer" might mean. Because then that's a whole conversation about "what is queer?" and sometimes you don't really go into that with someone.

The greatest privilege that white folks have as musicians is the freedom to do anything, genre-wise. "This is a white guy who sings R&B." "This is a white chick who sings country." in the pop realm, in the wider, mainstream realm, for white folks, it's all open, it's all ready to go. And it's even fun and exotic when a white woman starts singing gospel music, But the "music ghettos" for Black people are R&B and rap and some gospel so weird. I find the worst part of it is that you can see folks, and I've done this myself, limiting themselves based on what they know is expected of them. When I started singing, nobody was like, "oh, you have a great voice." I think, as a Black woman, that's expected. But they'd ask, "Can you do runs? Can you belt? Are you doing this diva Black woman shit that Black women are supposed to be able to do?" "No, I can't do that. Or I don't." These expectations that limit us and we limit ourselves. That hurts me. That frustrates me. And it takes time, even if you know it's silly, to get it out of your own mind. Just do what makes sense to you. Don't do what people are looking for somebody like you to do.

I've been learning more about marketing, being a working musician. I don't know how to approach venues. I have no idea what to tell them about what I do. "What genre is it? What do you do?" It just feels like nobody gets it. I'm just now getting a tiny bit of bookings with actual music venues. Just the limitation of genre and the limitations of what's expected is violence.

## Techniques and Technology

**SM:** Your current music is made entirely by you?

**BS:** Yeah. I really like it. I'm pretty particular and I can be a control freak when it comes to artistic projects and there's something that I really like about music being like a journal. It's your voice, everything is your voice, it's from your story and your perspective. Having the option and the space

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to work by yourself is so nice. It's just like you're not waiting on anyone, you're not paying anyone, and you, in theory, know exactly what you want. So you can just sit and figure it out.

But it does get very frustrating. It does get lonely.

**SM:** What is frustrating about it?

**BS:** Well, you're your only advocate. Only you know what's wrong with something and what needs to be fixed and how much it took to do this thing. Sometimes my voice is annoying and I can't sing the melody the way that I want to sing it, and nobody's going to step in and help fix it. So I think it's a double edged sword. There's a lot of great things about it but it can be very lonely and frustrating that way.

**SM:** What is your songwriting process?

**BS:** I think the best songs that I've written start with the melody and the feeling. The feeling happens, and the melody is just there. And sometimes a bassline and sometimes a chorus, usually words come last. I'll find the words that make sense with the feeling and the melody. I'll write around it. But sometimes I write words first. see something, and I'm like that... that should be a song, then I'll write words and then the melody. But for me it's always a better song if the melody comes first. Because it's an energy, a mood, as opposed to this narrative that you're working around. That feels a little bit more constructed and less natural. The best is when you have a melody that you remember. You go to sleep and you remember it the next day. That's a good melody because you didn't forget it, it was memorable.

**SM:** One thing I find striking about your music is the way you use musical sounds and textures. How do you compose those sounds?

**BS:** That's newer for me. What I started writing was voice, layering my voice, and having a bassline on piano. Just very simple production. I've been really enjoying the very spacey, ambient feeling of indie R&B music right now. It's something that I'm learning: creating mood. The last project I did [*Jaded. dark love songs.*] was the first project that was a concept album, so it was all of one mood. You're going through the computer sounds and find a sound and it's fun. Or sometimes you never find the instrument that really sounds right, but you make it work.

I'm working with a lot of synthetic instruments. I'll go into the EQ, and with a lot of the synths, I just turn the treble way down, because its very like, "eeee." its very nasal to me. I find if I mute the highs, it's just a little less obnoxious. But generally, I use lots of voices. Voices can be light, they can be creepy, angelic.

**SM:** On the new album, *Jaded*, there's a voice at the beginning of the song "Haunted." Is that you, pitch-shifted down?

**BS:** Yeah.

**SM:** You use your voice in so many different ways. You have clarity in the lead vocal, but you also use your voice as an instrument, as a texture.

**BS:** Its partly out of necessity, because that's the instrument I know best. I connect most to voice, and I think that people in general are like that. I mean, it's literally human, and it also feels primal, it feels spiritual, relatable. I feel like the best way to connect to people's hearts and spirits.

**SM:** Do you record your music on computer? What do you use?

**BS:** I started on Garageband. I didn't really discover it, and computer recording technology, until college. And when I did I was like, "ooo..." I just went crazy and I was doing a capella tracks. I was using the instruments. It took me a long time. I started when I was 19, just playing with it. I was recording on the mic in the computer, which is terrible. Slowly building up and learning more things. I wasn't sharing the music with anyone, but it was really therapeutic. I had a great time sitting by myself at the computer making harmonies with the computer mic. It was so much fun.

I started using Logic Pro on the *Song a Day 2015* album. It's basically the same thing as Garageband, just more complex and more sounds. I was on Garageband for so long because I felt scared to upgrade. "I'm just going to stick with this." But mostly, after a point, I was like, "just play with it, just figure it out." You know, I want to learn everything and I want to be at least mediocre at everything.

**SM:** What is your space like that you record in? Do you have a home studio?

**BS:** Kind of. Its basically just a room. It used to be a garage, and its just a room with a bed and books and my desk and my monitors and my computer. I actually love the way the room sounds. Its got a thick rug, so its muted, not too wet. Its a great balance.

I would really love to, in future work with folks with more skills than I have. You know, musicians especially. But being able to work with a producer that that can help create a really nice dance beat. I want to make people dance. That's a skill. I haven't learned it.

**SM:** Why is gaining these production skills so important to you?

**BS:** There's a lot of maleness in all parts of music. It's sad and frustrating.

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The few experiences I've had in studios, it's a room with a bunch of dudes in it. And you're in a vocal booth and they're telling you what to do. They could be really nice and really smart, but it's just a profoundly uncomfortable atmosphere. When I listen to stuff I did in the studios it didn't sound like me at all. It sounded like I was trying to be a certain way and it didn't make sense. I've found that the male musical voice in hop-hop and electronic music is very much the same. There are no subtleties. I found myself attracted to female producers because there was just something different in the way they put their stuff together. But since getting more knowledge about Logic I really want to learn everything I can about production and be a producer because I don't want someone controlling my music, even if I'm working with someone I want to be able to say, "nah, actually, let's do something else." I don't know music theory that well: the words that go with the things. I don't read music. There are some things I don't know and in a space with dudes and male privilege it can get very snobby. They'll say, "you just have to do to the diminished fifth" and it's like, "alright, alright..." you know? Its traumatic. I'll get a temper at that because it feels like such a deeper thing, like such a bigger thing that they don't necessarily think about or even understand. Even now there are more women producing their own stuff and like, you can tell. You can tell that their voice is coming through on all levels and that's when I started looking up, the credits, "did she produce this?" It's very exciting.

### Performing Live

**SM:** What is your live performance of your music like? How do you accomplish it?

**BS:** I perform live I use a loop pedal for some of my songs. I'd seen folks use loop pedals in college and I really liked it. After college we started using one for a song with The Lost Bois. We did one song with The Lost Bois; it's a lot to set it up for one song. There's feedback, there's a lot of difficulties working with a loop pedal live. I didn't think I was going to perform with a loop pedal. I was just going to play with it. But when I started performing on my own that was all I could really do and feel comfortable. I mean, I could play a little guitar but not that well and you know, working with voices and harmonies it was like the only instrument that I could really do what I wanted to do on. Then I just started writing songs for especially for the loop pedal.

**SM:** What specific loop pedal do you use?

**BS:** I started with a Boss RC-20, with one loop track. The pedal is so hearty;



it's like a tank. You could drop them, you could run them over. They're going to last forever. Then I went to the same basic model, but with two tracks. With the second loop track you can take away or add. It could be two layers, it could be three harmonies, it could be beatbox. With two tracks, each has an undo/redo function and that allows for more complexity in terms of building it up, breaking it down, taking things away, fading things out. I got a TC-Helicon Voicelive Touch and it has a lot of really awesome effects. But the gain is weird, and there's feedback issues when you use it live. It's very hard to control. It has touchscreen buttons. If you don't have an actual button, when does the machine register you pushing it? When you have a pedal, you push it. I pushed it down, it's there. But if it's a touchscreen, it's computer. It's a little computer, and it scares me.

**SM:** How does the pedal help you organize your live show?

**BS:** The theatrics of building the loop is part of the performance. When I do a cover it's fun to arrange it so you don't know what it is until the end of the building of the loop or until I start singing. And it can't be too long, but if it's too short, it's kind of boring. It feels sometimes like a magic trick, a parlor trick. Loop pedals can be limiting in terms of song structure and chord structure. You know, you can't change the chord structure in the middle of a loop song. It limits what songs you do. In theory, you do could a song with changes. I was trying to arrange "River" by Joni Mitchell as a holiday thing. It has an A and a B section, about sixteen bars altogether.

You could do the whole song. I could build the loop and have the harmonies. But it would just take so long, I'd be sitting there, "here's one more harmony." I've tried probably all of my songs on the loop pedal, at least briefly, and there are some songs you can't do because there's a bridge that's totally different or it's layered in a way that I can't really do with just voice. So, there are specific songs. If I have a show on my own, and somebody says, "oh, play this." Sometimes I just have to say, "oh, I can't. I'm sorry. I can't do that live."

**SM:** Why use the loop pedal instead of pre-recorded backing tracks?

**BS:** Tracks are really impersonal. As a performer it feels lazy and it feels like you're barely present. Technically, a loop pedal is a track, but you're making a track right there, with the audience. Sometimes backing tracks can be great for the beat songs with dancing. But now when I see people perform with tracks. There's something that's hard to get into about it. It feels taboo now, to me.

**SM:** In general, what are your feelings about these various technologies?

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**BS:** I'm not excited about tech stuff. And it's a weird dynamic because I feel like I'm using a new and seemingly complicated technology to do something really old: something really new and something really old. A lot of the stuff I do live, the slower stuff, is kind of like a chant. We were talking about using melody earlier, the primal need to just sing, to hear voice, to hear harmonies. It just feels like a ritual. It feels like prayer. Like prayer, or like a chant.

**SM:** How do you want your audience to respond?

**BS:** With some of the faster songs, it's more fun, it's more silly, and people can bop their heads and sing along. Some of the slower stuff is more meditative: "please, you can close your eyes, go somewhere else, just be... in it." That's what I like to do when I see music, just be with the song and for a moment be outside of my body. When I have solo shows at the end I'll get everyone in a circle, even really big groups, even really big venues, get everyone in a circle and we'll be shoulder-to-shoulder and we'll close our eyes. Basically, we become a loop pedal.

Someone offers a bassline or a beat or a repeating phrase and someone else adds on and somebody else adds on until everybody is singing or speaking or percussing. People appreciate being able to do that and share it and hear what other folks have to say.

**SM:** Your live show is sometimes more than a musical performance, right?

**BS:** Yeah, I facilitate songwriting workshops that are mini versions of the songwriting camp I went to when I was 13. Everybody knows how to write a song. Everybody knows what a song usually does. I think most people feel like they can't write songs unless they play an instrument or they've been trained in certain way. Which is fucked up and not true. People feel it's less accessible to people just because its music. I want to make it accessible, make it okay. I mean, humans, that what we do. it's the oldest art form.

I performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland in November of 2015 and I did a songwriting workshop with young girls, ages 9-16. We did the song circle together. It was small group so they were a little timid and giggly. After the workshop I did a screening of my short film and sang some songs, and we did the song circle again with everyone, the young girls and the adults that came for the screening. The girls were together in one group on one side and we started the song circle. It was really beautiful, a slow song. And then these girls, they had this one melody and they were like harmonizing with each other and singing. As soon as people realized what was going on, the adults started to fade out and the girls ended the song with their melody. It was so cool, like they were show-

ing us that they were tentative, but they had done it before. “We know how to do this, we write songs.”

**SM:** If you could make music that way, as opposed to using these other technologies, would you do that?

**BS:** I would do both. The loop pedal, there’s just something special about it. And doing something alone is special. I value that. But, you know, I dream of having more resources and bigger venues and one day having a choir, a lot of people singing. And creating songs with voices and composing for many voices. Have you ever seen Eric Whitacre, the “Global Choir” thing? I was so moved by that. Those pieces and that process: they mixed one million voices together.

**SM:** What are you looking to do in the future with your music?

**BS:** With music I’m really thinking about the live show. I want to do more storytelling, instead of, “Hey, how you doin’, I’m Be. This song is about this,” sing the song. “This song is about that,” sing the song. I like having more of a dramatic thread, a connective thread throughout. I play with a band live now. If I have a solo show I’ll do a set with loop pedal and a set with the band. I would like a mixture, in both realms. I’d like to work with folks who can manipulate synthesized sounds live, I love that. I’d like to go deeper into both sides, real instruments and synthesized instruments, is the goal. I love and respect electronic instruments and sounds, but somebody playing a bassline on an upright bass is fantastic. It’s just organic and beautiful and imperfect, and that where I want to lean more toward.

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