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Lily: Hi everyone. I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health focused interview series. Today I am talking to my friend, Taylor Momsen, who is the lead singer of the band, The Pretty Reckless. Today, we're going to be talking about both of our experiences with loss over the last several years, how music pulled her out of a dark place, mentally and emotionally, and everything that went into her new album, *Death by Rock and Roll*. Thank you so much for watching, and I hope you enjoy.

Thank you for being here. I mean, I just really appreciate it.

Taylor: Thank you. Thank you guys for having me. I think this is so great. I'm so glad we finally worked out a time. I've been wanting to do this since you first started it.

Lily: Thank you so much. I've met you very briefly, but first connected with you when you performed at a tribute for my dad a couple years ago. I just want to say, since then, your love and support has been really, really appreciated, and the work you've done with Matt and Kim has been so rad, and so awesome to see. It warms my heart to see that.

Taylor: Thank you.

Lily: I would love to start by talking about your new album, The Pretty Reckless' new album, *Death by Rock and Roll*. What was the inspiration for that? What was the process of creating that?

Taylor: Oh, man, that is a loaded question.

Lily: That's the whole interview. [laughs]

Taylor: It's the whole interview. Well, *Death by Rock and Roll* was born out of a lot of loss, and a lot of pain, and a lot of tragedy. We went through a lot of what I'd call one-two punches in The Pretty Reckless world. It's a little bizarre to speak to you, because it started with your father, losing him. We were opening for Soundgarden, which to me, was just the highest of highs. Respect is not the right word. I love your father, I loved their music. I love Soundgarden so much, to my core, that I still don't know how to put it into words. To be on that tour, opening for them, was just the most incredible honor and experience of my life.



Obviously, it ended very tragically. It's a bit bizarre to bring this up with you. That's where it started for me, where I started to kind of fall down, and to move past that shortly after that, right as I started to get my feet back on the ground, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't in a great place to be public, at the time. Putting on a show every night, and getting on stage, and trying to entertain fans that are so deserving of my full attention, just felt very forced. I felt like a fraud. I felt like I was cheating them out of an experience that they were so deserving of.

So I canceled everything to process in my own time. I went home, and as soon as I started to get my feet back on the ground, and move forward, I was starting to write music, I had a couple songs that I was really proud of. I was calling our producer Kato. Kato was much more than just our producer. He was my best friend in the entire world, essentially the fifth member of the band. He just didn't tour with us. There would be no *Pretty Reckless* if I had never met Kato.

So I was calling him going, "You know, we've got to move forward here. Let's get in the studio. I don't know what the songs are for. I don't know if they're for a record, or an EP, or maybe they suck, and they're for nothing. Who knows? Let's do something."

As soon as we started to put those plans in motion, I got the phone call that Kato had died in a motorcycle accident. That was the nail in the coffin for me, where I just spiraled downward so quickly into depression and just this dark hole with no light that I just didn't see a way out of, and everything that comes with loss, and grief, and trauma, that I just was not equipped to handle.

I looked at life and I just kind of went, "Everything I love is dead. What's the point? I don't see my future anymore, and not just with music, but a future, period." That's a very scary place to be in. This album, *Death by Rock and Roll*, even though the title might sound very morbid to some, is actually a phrase that Kato used to say all the time. It was back when we formed the band in 2008, it was this phrase and motto that we lived our life by, death, by rock and roll, which meant, live life your own way, and go out your own way, and don't let anybody tell you differently. Rock and roll till I die, it's very much this battle cry for life and this battle cry for freedom. It was very empowering.

When he passed, that phrase just kept resonating in my head, in a new way, I guess, in a way that I couldn't escape. This is probably the first album that I had titled before I had actually written all the material for it. Really, the writing of this album is, I credit it to the reason that I'm still around today. It's the reason that I'm still here. It's the thing that really pulled me through and allowed me to get to the other side of that very dark hole that was not good. It was not a good place to be and it's not fun.

When I write music, I write music for myself. I make music for me because that's all I know how to do. That's my identity. When I write, that's how I find my center, that's how I find my balance. It's been the thing that I've always turned to. I always say that music is my best friend, and I felt that this album was, by expressing everything that I



couldn't say out loud when I finally picked up a guitar and when I finally put pen to paper, that was really the first step of me getting my life back on track.

It was necessary because I came very dangerously close to the opposite effect, where I had to make a very conscious decision of death or move forward and I luckily chose to move forward. And so this record is very much an homage to Kato and to all the loved ones that I've lost in my life, and all the musical heroes that we've all lost throughout history, way too young, and way too soon, because that's the only way, like even if someone's no longer with us, physically on this planet, that doesn't mean their memory has to die.

I feel I'm a battle warrior for Kato. He's no longer here, but I refuse to let his memory die. I say his name every day. The title track of the song, *Death by Rock and Roll*, it starts with Kato's footsteps, which is a recording that we had of him walking down the hallway of the House of Loud studios, which is where we made our first album *Light Me Up*. It was very important to me that it was book-ended with him, and even though he wasn't here physically for the making of this album, he's so much a part of it, but it wouldn't exist without him. By prolonging that and by fighting for his memory, he can never die, and what better way to keep someone's memory alive than through music?

Lily: One of the pieces of advice that my dad repeated throughout my entire life, especially as I got older and I started really loving music-- I've been in piano since I was six, and I started writing my own stuff and singing with my friends all the time. He had always said to me like, "No matter what, you will never be successful unless you're doing this because you want to do it, because you're doing it for the love of doing it. You won't be successful if the ultimate goal is success." That's something that-- That applies to anything, not just music, but for the sake of the conversation, absolutely, what you just said, you do it because music is your best friend and you do it because that's what's in your heart. Whether The Pretty Reckless was The Pretty Reckless or not, music would still be that major part of your life. That speaks so much to mental health in general of finding that thing that you would do it no matter what, and that's the healing process.

Taylor: Absolutely. Music and the arts come with such another internal element that is different and it takes everything you have. If you're distracted, if your goal of success is commercial success, or bending to someone else's rules, or taking outside opinions and somehow letting them affect you, then you're not ever going to achieve success because you're not doing it for the right reasons. If you don't have this dying passion inside of you that is saying, "If I don't do this, I'm not myself," then do something else.

It can still be a hobby but don't make it your career. You will find that you were the happiest and the most successful, at least I do. When I finish writing a song and I take a step back from it and I look at it and I go, "That's really good. I'm really proud of that." That's success. Anything that happens after that is beyond my control. Good, bad, that's just life.



Lily: I'm curious where that point was for you, that you were able to go from being in that dark place that you weren't sure if you were going to come out of, to being able to put that down on paper and create music. I've been in that place that you were talking about where you're really trying to think, like, "What is next for me?" Drawing a blank is one of the scariest feelings in the world. I'm just curious what that turning point was for you, if you can pinpoint that?

Taylor: Well, that's a very good question. I went through a period where I couldn't listen to music, and I finally came to the realization months, and months, and months later of this absence of sound, it was hurting me. I need music in my life the same way I need water, and food, and oxygen. It's something that I thrive on and I've been depriving myself of it for so long. I didn't know where to start because everything I put on was just overwhelming. So I started from scratch, because that's what I came to the conclusion in my own head was, "Well, when you lose everything, where do you start, you start from the beginning."

I went back to the first band I ever heard, and the first band I fell in love with, which was the Beatles. I listened to every Beatles record and I listened to every Beatles demo and the anthology and watched every documentary and every little snippet of anything I could get my hands on. From that, that led into all the other bands I listened to growing up and all the bands that inspired me. That led into Led Zeppelin and The Who, and Pink Floyd, and AC/DC, and Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton and Cream and Oasis, and Bob Dylan and Neil Young, and Eagles, and I can list these bands forever... The Doors, and this could go on for a long time... And eventually getting to a place where I could listen to your father's music, or I could listen to Soundgarden and Audioslave, and his solo stuff, and have it bring me joy, instead of just immense sorrow. It really did bring me back to life. That was the turning point. It was turning into something that I always knew and just and trusting that again, I guess, and trusting myself, and trusting my judgment of like, "This has worked for me my entire life. Why wouldn't it work now?"

Lily: Right. I think you pointed something out that's so vital in that is, it didn't happen all at once and it took time to get there. That's one of the gnarliest things in my experience about grief, is no matter how logical you are, it truly does feel like this is where you're going to be forever. That was my experience with it. To hear you say that it took time and it didn't come like, "Oh, one day I woke up and I felt so much better." Right. There's actually, speaking of, an Alice In Chains song called *Black Gives Way to Blue*, that I just got to perform at a benefit for the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, which was super fun, but that's what that song's about. Jerry told me that's what that song is about, is that everything feels exactly what you said. You were stuck in this blackness, you're stuck in this darkness, and then eventually, that point of blue, that point of light comes through. It's not an immediate thing but it happens eventually and sticking with it until you get there, you're living proof of that. Thank you for telling that story.

Taylor: Oh, thank you. The phrase like, "It gets better," I feel like when you're in it, God, you don't want to hear that. I just looked at anyone who was trying to reach out



or help and I just was like, "You have no idea. How dare you tell me how I feel?" I was so put off by that. Now that I've come out the other side of it, I can truly say, with an honest like perspective on it, it does and just it's going to take time. I tried therapy. I went to multiple therapists. That path can be really great, but it's also very challenging to find a therapist that works for you like finding that connection. I don't know that I ever really did. That's why I internalized everything and I used music as my therapy.

But the one little tidbit that I did learn, which was something that I still use to this day was baby steps. When you go through a traumatic experience, or you're in a depression, or you're dealing with anxiety, or whatever your situation may be, baby steps.

I'm going to say this so badly, but the way this therapist explained it to me, it was like, If you're standing on a lake, it's a frozen lake, and you're on one side and you have to get to the other side, it's going to seem like an impossible task if you look at the other side. But if you just look down and put one little foot in front of the other foot, and the other foot, pretty soon, you're going to look up, and you're going to turn around and you're going to be closer to the other side than the side you started from.

And that's living. That's what life is. It's living and it's taking all of these curveballs that are awful that life throws at you and figuring out how to move forward with them. I think that that's a huge part of healing and moving forward too. That's never going to go away, but now it's become a part of me. It's like another piece of armor or something. It's something that I wear on my shoulders or on my sleeve or whatever. It's a part of who I am now and that's a really powerful thing when you can accept that.

Lily: Absolutely. I was literally just talking to one of my oldest friends about this the other day about, in my mental health journey and in my journey of grief, I think there can be this feeling, I've absolutely had this feeling, where the ultimate goal is to live a life where it doesn't affect you. Which is obviously not reality, but I think societally, that can be the message or that's the desire, is like, "One day, I'll be living this life, where it doesn't touch me anymore, doesn't affect me anymore, where I've essentially forgotten that it happened."

She said to me that you have to stop looking for a way out and start looking for a way through. I think that is how I've really tried to reframe this journey, is aiming to get through the darkest part of it, to make meaning of the situation, and to be able to pay homage, and to be able to listen to my dad's music. There are some days where I can do that and where it's really healing, and there are some days where it's way too hard.

The goal is to be able to move through that situation with that alongside me, with the memory of him alongside me, and with our relationship still being a very real thing. Like you said, saying Kato's name, the relationship still lives on just in a different way, versus trying to find a way out of it as if it didn't happen. That's never going to be the case. That's never going to be my life. That's never going to be your life.

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Taylor: Yes. You have to accept that, that there's no hiding from what happens, that you have to embrace it and move forward with that. I tried it. I tried it. I tried to shut myself off from the world. I did for a long time. I shut myself off and I hid in my own head in the middle of nowhere, wouldn't answer my phone, wouldn't talk to anyone, wouldn't see anyone, and that didn't help anything. I think that when you go through something that's traumatic, you can't hide from it even as much as you may want to and as much as you may try. Eventually, that's going to catch up to you and you're going to have to face it at some point.

Lily: Right. Because there's no way out of it, there's only a way through it. On that theme that you're talking about too, of transformation and moving through something, you're the queen of transformation, in my eyes, and being able to move through. Just watching you being able to move through the entertainment industry, which is characteristically very unforgiving, I'm just curious how your mental health prevailed through that moving through being a child actress, then an actress as a young adult, and then moving into the music realm. How did you take care of your mental health within that?

Taylor: It's a really good question. I get asked about my childhood a lot, but I never really get asked from this kind of perspective of mental health. I don't know that I ever really spent a lot of time thinking about it. I think that I was always on the go. Acting was something that I got put into at a very young age. I started when I was two. It wasn't something that I ever chose. It was something that I-- I've said very harsh things about it in the past and in my rebellious teenage years, whatever, and I meant everything I said, but I didn't mean it as aggressively as it came across.

It just wasn't something that I chose. It wasn't a passion of mine. It was just something that I always did. I didn't know any different. Music, on the other hand, was something that I not only chose, I feel like it chose me, and it chose me at a very young age. My dad was a massive rock 'n' roll fan. That's an understatement.

[laughter]

If you walk into my father's house, it's a museum of paraphernalia of everything, rock 'n' roll. I grew up listening to his vinyl collections so I can't get away from rock and roll even if I wanted to. Luckily, I didn't. Because part of my childhood was so isolated, my notebooks became my friends and the records I listened to became my friends. My notebooks, I don't mean my diary. I mean, I started writing poetry and I started writing how I was feeling and expressing myself, not to share with anyone, but for myself, and that I eventually just would inevitably start to put melody to. I met Kato, and I met Ben, the guitar player, and my songwriting partner. The three of us met when I was probably 14, 15.

Lily: Wow. I didn't realize that early. That's amazing.

Taylor: I feel like I'd just turned 15. It was one of those-- I don't know how to describe it. One of those otherworldly meetings of minds, where it's just kismet. It was one of those magical moments where we spent like 10 minutes together and

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[laughs] we all looked to each other and went, "This is weird. I've known you a really long time. I've known you forever. What are you--? We've all--"

Lily: Right.

Taylor: I don't even know if I believe in past lives. I'm not specifically a religious person by any means, or I don't follow any sort of organized religion and neither did they. It's just this very weird moment we were all like, "I've known you for way longer than any of us have been alive and this is weird." That's essentially where The Pretty Reckless formed, was that first meeting, and shortly after that, I met Mark and Jamie. I quit my day job and followed the thing that truly made me happy in life.

Lily: That's amazing and that's such a testament to what, turning inward, you were talking about earlier, will transform your mental health, listening to yourself and following your passion, following what's true to you. What is something that is giving you hope right now?

Taylor: I don't know. It's such strange times right now. I'm hopeful for the future. I'm hopeful that I think that we're all, hopefully, all the human race, all starting to get back on track and starting the healing process. It's been a very tumultuous few years, to say the least. I don't want to get too political or anything here, but I think that hopefully, at the end of all of this, at the end of this pandemic, and we can all go back to live shows, and play concerts, and be together. I think that's going to be such a powerful moment. And I think that as long as we can remember to be patient, and do our part, that will happen sooner than later, and when it does, we will be in a better place than where we started off from. That's something that I'm hopeful for.

Lily: Well, Taylor, it has meant the world to me to have you here. It's been such a pleasure, and to seeing you in person and not through a screen as soon as possible.

Taylor: As soon as possible. That's what I'm hopeful for.

[laughter]

Taylor: Lily, I love you.

Lily: Love you. Talk to you soon for sure.

Taylor: Stay safe. Definitely. Text me anytime. I'm always around.

[music]

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