

mirror sound





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A Look into the People and Processes behind Self-Recorded Music

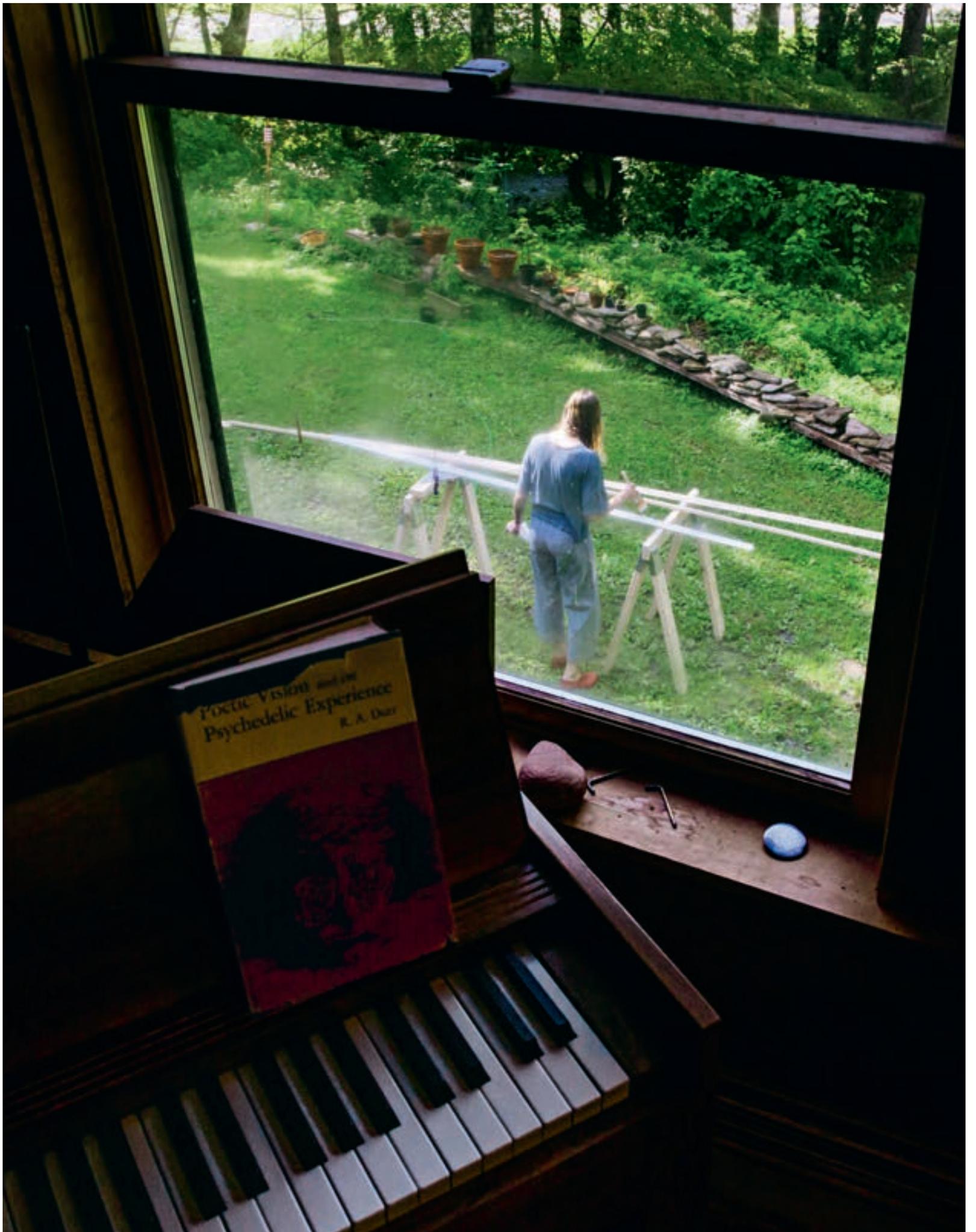
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Lawrence Azerrad
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Foreword by Carrie Brownstein

Prestel
Munich | London | New York

table of contents

Foreword by Carrie Brownstein	8
Introduction: “You Can Make Your Own Records?”	10
Chapter 01: The Sound of Solitude	18
Chapter 02: My Kingdom for a Four-Track	32
Chapter 03: Marination	52
Chapter 04: Escape Rocket	66
Chapter 05: I Have Eight Reels of Tape Strapped to My Body	90
Chapter 06: Engineering from the Heart	106
The Interviews	128
Afterword	184
Acknowledgments	186
About the Authors	189





foreword

carrie brownstein

As I write this, Billie Eilish has just swept the 2020 Grammys in all four major categories—the second artist in Grammy history to achieve this feat—and the first woman. During the thank-you speech for Song of the Year, Eilish’s brother and producer, Finneas, proclaimed with a hint of bewilderment as he took it all in, “We just make music in a bedroom together.”

But what does “we just make” actually mean? An aim of *Mirror Sound* is to deconstruct that very making—the actual doing. Self-recording can be facile, sure: plug and play, hit the record button, and voilà! Software like GarageBand and Logic are mostly user-friendly. But there still exists a learning curve—terminology to memorize, shortcuts to master, inputs and outputs, endless effects and settings and drop-down menus and gear. Not to mention reviews of gear, comments about reviews of gear, and comments about comments. Don’t forget the instructional videos you’ll likely need to watch that inadvertently crop out heads and focus on the human (male) crotch. In other words, making a record at home isn’t exactly easy. Despite its associations with adjectives like “lo-fi” or “amateurism” (no longer even applicable), many of us aspire to sonic landscapes that transcend the site specificity of where we record. If there’s grit, atmosphere, and clumsiness on the songs, we want it there on purpose. *Mirror Sound* explores how techniques are often born of mistakes. It’s a journey from the desultory to the intentional and back again: learning in order to unlearn.

Spencer Tweedy’s conversations with musicians and his own observations serve as much more than an instructional guide. This book is also about a fundamental reimagining of ourselves and the spaces in which we create and invent. It’s not that the recording studio got smaller, it’s that the bedroom became bigger. Not literally, but in the way privacy itself has collapsed, the way we collectively perceive intimacy as a public offering. This is about the broadcast of selfhood in the form of

songs, about inviting people into our small spaces until we realize the spaces aren’t small at all, nor our experiences insular and isolated. These stories are defiantly anti-diminutive, proof that there are giants inside us that with the right tools can hurl sounds twice our size upon the landscape.

Herein too are stories about a desire for seamlessness, about wanting to immerse. The drive or walk to a separate studio is not just a logistical journey, but a deviation and distraction from the creative sphere. In these interviews, we read about how home recording is a way of not just inventing one’s own mythology, but actually living inside it, as opposed to vacillating between two worlds. Of course, if you are your own engineer, you have to juggle being both madman and professor. That duality is its own form of obsession; self-recording has a way of validating the craziness and the compulsion.

Whereas home recording artists used to be the province of outsiders, they have become their own gatekeepers of sorts. Unintentionally, of course, and only by their sheer mastery of the self-recording process. But this does raise the bar along with outside expectations, and assures a kind of institutional validation, an insider status that self-recording skirted and avoided for many years. Which makes *Mirror Sound* all the more crucial, and timely. Tweedy isn’t setting out to prove the merits of self-recording, nor does he have to. He also eschews an either/or dynamic between professional and home studios; he doesn’t exalt or define purity or authenticity. Instead, Tweedy and coauthor Lawrence Azerrad explore and revel in the singularity of home recording but also its limitless nature. Above all, they illustrate how it reflects the individuality of the artists themselves. These stories remind us that in the end, no matter where and how you record, music is about reaching out, and asking the listener to reach in. Find us. Hear us.

Portland, Oregon
January 2020

Previous spread, left:
Hannah Cohen, Sam Owens’s (Sam Ebian) partner, in their backyard, the southern Catskills, New York

Previous spread, right:
Ty Segall, home detail,
Topanga, California

Foxygen’s Jonathan Rado,
studio detail, Los Angeles



introduction





“you can make your own records?”

spencer tweedy

I was in high school when I realized that it’s possible to record by yourself. Before that, making records—even just one song—seemed like something you needed to do in a studio, and studios seemed far away, expensive, for grown-ups. You needed a recording contract to get into a studio (I thought), and in order to have a recording contract, you needed to . . . wait for one to drop out of the sky from benevolent record label gods? I knew that Paul McCartney had made solo records at home, but that was Paul McCartney. I didn’t know that mortal people, even high school kids, could just *make records on their own*.

As it’s done for countless others, GarageBand helped with that realization. Around the same time that I was itching to record, artists like Grimes, Dum Dum Girls, and Smith Westerns were being recognized for having recorded albums with GarageBand, ushering in a new era of mass accessibility in recording that hadn’t been seen since four-track cassette recorders were popularized in the 1980s. (I would later discover that Emmitt Rhodes, Todd Rundgren, Wendy Carlos, and about a billion others had engineered their own records decades earlier, without GarageBand, and with traditional studiolike fidelity.)

It took me some time to realize that accessible recording went far beyond the miracle of GarageBand—that making a record on your own doesn’t mean you

have to use your laptop microphone or a limited digital interface, even if those tools are more than passable. As a self-recorder you can still use the *real* stuff, like outboard equipment with XLR inputs and outputs and power supplies and much-fetishized knobs and VU meters—even *tape machines*. You can build a *rack* of gear! And you don't need a multimillion-dollar, acoustically treated room to house it. It can fit in your childhood bedroom, nestled among stuffed animals and dolls.

As nice as it sounds, all that equipment is expensive, even without an Abbey Road-like facility. But self-recording artists find lots of ways to get the setup that works for them. They buy used, build from kits, and work day jobs. The nerdiest among them even invent their own gear designs (or their own clones of famous designs) to make great-sounding gear accessible.

I was extremely lucky in that my dad has his own recording studio, the Wilco Loft. At the same time I realized that self-recording was possible, he lent me two microphone preamplifiers and compressors. I set them up in a crevice in our basement (the same beneath-the-staircase-type nook that Harry Potter lived in) and got to experimenting and figuring out how the gear worked. Throughout the rest of high school, I expanded the nook from a two-channel setup to a home-built rack (i.e., a repurposed IKEA nightstand) of used equipment from Reverb.com and eBay. I didn't incorporate a patch bay, a basic building block of traditional studios, until two years later, and when I did, I felt like I'd built the legendary Sunset Sound studio from the ground up. It was exhilarating.

Not long after starting, I ran into the problem that self-recorders, especially self-recording drummers, have encountered since the dawn of the universe: the frantic run back and forth between your makeshift “control room” (where the tape machine or computer's controls are) and your “tracking room” (where the instruments

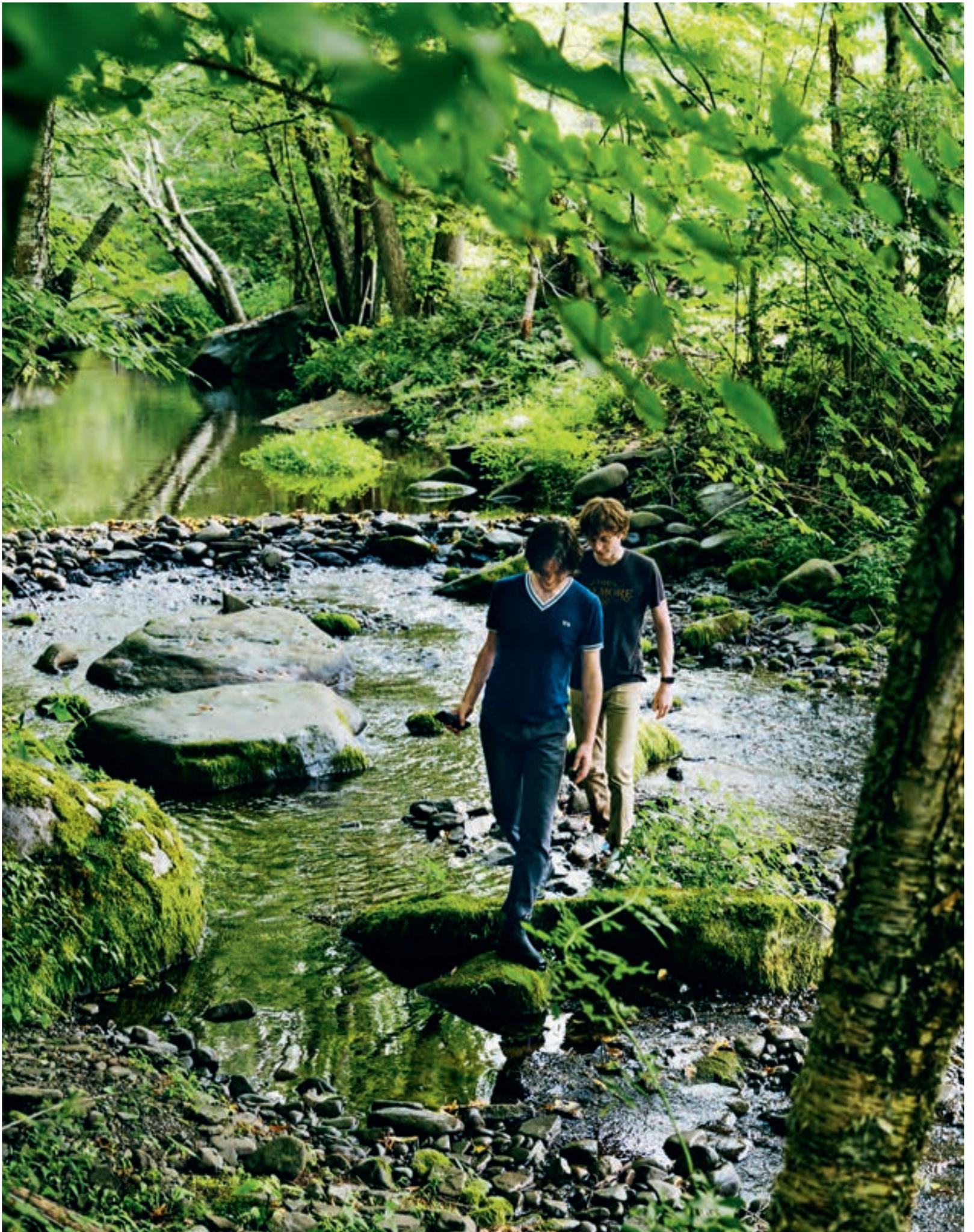
are), listening to a take, running “out” to make one tweak to the equipment settings, then running back to the tracking room to record another take, before doing it all over again. It can take hours to get the right sound this way. But it's *fun*. We don't need to worship at the altar of artistic self-sacrifice to recognize that, sometimes, we stumble upon special or surprising things by inconvenient means. Without being able to watch the meters that analyze an audio signal and make rapid tweaks as the sound comes in (the way an engineer might while recording other musicians), we're forced to be more attentive, to be more intentional, and to experiment.

The first song I recorded this way was almost inaudible because I didn't understand how to set the microphone levels properly. I put everything through three pieces of equipment (a preamplifier, a compressor, and the digital interface's built-in preamp) before reaching the recording computer, which, though inadvisable for a number of wonky reasons, forced me to find weird, character-enhancing settings. When I listened to the finished recording, it had about three minutes of silence at the beginning because I didn't know how to export files from the recording software correctly. Those three minutes passed, I finally heard the stuff I had recorded, and I felt the world-expanding feeling of wonder at having made something new. Because I was lucky enough to be my dad's son, a student with lots of free time, and a million other circumstances, I was able to record *now*. I didn't need a traditional studio.

Self-recording can have a steep learning curve. Thankfully, when you're working on your own, you have the freedom to learn from your mistakes. There's no engineer—or assistant engineer, or assistant-to-the-assistant, coffee-getting engineer—on the clock, so you can take as much time as you need (or as you have) to experiment. And that's where it gets really fun. You mess up. You learn quickly. Over time, you can get to know your recording

Previous spread: Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards and Spencer Tweedy in Tune-Yards's studio, Oakland, California

Sam Owens (Sam Evian) and Spencer Tweedy outside Owens's home and studio, the southern Catskills, New York





tools the same way a guitar player knows her first guitar. And you can become a better musician too.

The more you learn how those tools work, the more opportunities to make new sounds reveal themselves to you. The studio becomes a part of your creative process. I don't mean that in the *Sgt. Pepper's* reinventing-the-wheel kind of way; self-recording is valuable even if you don't find a whole new way of applying it. In my experience, the exciting and inspiring parts of self-recording happen in the details—in little accidents that make a song “click” together in a way that it might not have if you hadn't had the opportunity to try out different arrangements and sonic palettes by yourself. Self-recording gives you the opportunity to care as much or as little about those details as you like.

The technical concepts and all the jargon that come with self-recording can seem oppressively complex; some people, whether purposely or accidentally, reinforce that perception. That's partly why it took me so long to realize that it's possible to self-record, that traditional studio equipment is within reach. But with this book and the stories in it, I want to show that the basics are simpler than they might seem. The best way to learn about them is to get to work. And you probably have already. That's exactly the opportunity that self-recording affords us.





↓ Suzanne Cianci and Spencer Tweedy at Cianci's home and studio in Bolinas, California

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▶▶ the sound of solitude

“I think that the feeling of solitude is what makes my writing and recording sound the way it does. . . . I guess the best work comes out of you when you’re in your favorite environment, in the environment that you feel best in.”

—Melina Duterte (Jay Som)



