

# Bonfire Madigan Shive on Motherhood, Creativity, and Mad Gifts

An Interview by Nina Packebush  
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**Mutha** You were part of the original Riot Grrrl scene sharing bills with bands like Sleater -Kinney, Bikini Kill, and Mecca Normal, can you talk a little bit about what led you from the world of Riot Grrrl to the world of motherhood?

**Bonfire** I never really saw myself as a mother. I never saw myself as having kids. I never saw them coming through my body as me being their biological mother. I already felt like I was a sort of spiritual mother to parts of the Riot Grrrl movement. I was fine with going on this trajectory with what I call being constantly pregnant with ideas, activism and art. I felt really blessed. So I thought for sure, at least the way I was going, that I would continue to become a radical activist and artist. I didn't realize that motherhood would be a profound calling, so much so that I was really thinking that I was living in an active psychosis.



Basically what happened to me was I became haunted by the voice of a child asking me if I would be his doorway. I was haunted in a great way, but also a terrifying way because I thought maybe it was a metaphor for something else. I didn't think it was literally a child looking for me. For the first time in my adult life I sought a psychologist, talk therapy, and "professional" help for the voices that I was hearing. Motherhood for me; I now think of it as a sort of monastic calling. These little Buddha's were looking for me, these spirits wanted to show up as little gurus in my life. Their needs and desires and so forth have to come before yours, so what I needed to learn was how *me* becomes *we*. All my intellectual ideas of collectivism were showing up in the form of ego being obliterated at least for a while. Uber radical feminist artist *me* was being called out to really be a *we*.

**Mutha** So you were hearing the voice of this little child who was asking you to be his doorway, had you heard voices before? Is that how you came to be involved in the radical mental health movement?

**Bonfire** I've been actively hearing voices and having experiences of reality that mainstream psychiatry would call delusions, or all the labels that they put on the "symptoms" that I've had all my life. I feel really blessed for the set of experiences that I've had. Those experiences were mostly very positive, hearing the voices, seeing the

visions, having interactions with alternate realities and alternate states of consciousness. And even the mood extremes, not always, as those are and always have been more difficult for me to manage in relationships, but most of that stuff I was experiencing as



this gift. That's why when I joined The Icarus Project right next to Sascha and Jacks in 2002. I knew that I needed to offer that experience because, I felt it wasn't being heard enough. That's when I started to do the deep digging into the Psychiatric Survivors and Mad Pride Movements and for me building a kind of temple for mad gifts.

**Mutha** How do you manage these sorts of extreme states?

**Bonfire** I developed my own tool kit of wellness, a *mad map* and part of that is really staying active in art and expression and leaving all that space for the extremes to show me where I need to go. Staying in touch with what's going on deeper—on a meta level—maybe a spiritual level, maybe a sociopolitical level.

**Mutha** How did you realize that this child's voice was literally your child and then decide that you would be his doorway?

**Bonfire** It's crazy how it happened to me. I was literally in the Zapatista, EZLN autonomous zones. I was there, with some other folks, doing Icarus Project research around nonhierarchical community based government systems. I can point to the moment in my adult life that forever obliterated where my life was to where it is now. I can literally pinpoint this moment to the exact date and time, the exact latitude and longitude where the voice that had been interacting with me for a few years called me out in a bonfire at close to midnight in this little village in Mexico.

This little child's voice said, "Papa, Papa, there's my father, Papa." And I looked through the fire and there was a man looking directly into my eyes. It was like the literal deer in the headlights and all time stopped. I went into this altered state and when I came to again I realized my chest and my shirt and my face were soaked with my own tears and he was standing next to me. So literally the child looking for me said, "There's my dad," and here I was suddenly with him at a bonfire. And this man asked me, "What's your name? ¿Cómo te llamas?" and my Spanish was so little, it was my first time ever in a Latin American country and I started laughing through my tears and I said, "They call me Bonfire. Bonfire Madigan, but please you can call me Madigan."

It was a totally unbelievable cosmic calling and connection. And we ended up spending the next four days together in, for me, a total literal other world high. Kiki, now my partner, and I had this intense connection, but it was so strange for me. I have been out as a queer person basically since I became aware of what sexuality was. And I have spent more of my adult life with primary partners and in committed relationships with people who more identify as women, so it was very interesting to me, feeling that the universe was calling for me to have a primary partner whose experience is more male identified. And he was from another culture and language and his set of life experiences was so different than mine. For all intents and purposes we didn't "actually" know each other, but I guess we actually did know each other. Basically we both felt this huge calling to just jump and we did. I definitely went down the rabbit hole in the most extraordinary way.

This was in 2007, we spent four days together and then I went home and we didn't see each other again until 2009. I went to Mexico City and I met him there. By that time we were talking more about what we were doing and what that meant and where it was coming from. We made a commitment to be the most extraordinary co-parents that we could for this kid, these kids. Now there's two of them, a boy and a girl. They both came that way from a dreamtime calling to be a reality and in fact when I got back to San Francisco I took the pregnancy test and it was positive. As my friend Jane LeCroy says, "There's no false positives, just false negatives." When I took that pregnancy test I took it like four or five times and they were all positive. Then I went to the Women's Health Clinic on Market Street and this amazing gay male nurse was like, "Well let me tell you, Honey, here's your diagnosis. You're gonna have a baby if you want." I remember walking out of that clinic, again, in an altered state, knowing my life was going to drastically, dramatically change forever and I would never be that fierce, uber independent, feminist, radical performing artist that I thought I was. My identity would forever be changed.

**Mutha** How has motherhood affected your creativity? Or has it?

**Bonfire** During my pregnancy and during the times leading up to my pregnancies I felt crazy creative and was working on quite a lot. I loved working and being pregnant. The monotony and drudgery of it is the time management stuff. That gets to be hard. When the illuminations and the creativity is there buzzing, just making the time and getting in the groove of documenting it and working with it and flirting with it and



teasing it out to pieces that are going to live in the world again. So on one level I'm very frustrated because I have been working on a really huge new album and I was working in the years leading up to being pregnant and then once I got pregnant I kind of had to put it aside, at least doing all the work in the studio to finish it. Part of it is that I didn't have the resources to take it to the home stretch, and I'm still dealing with that. I have to deal with the drudgery of the business of producing work that gets out into the world.

During that time I was hit really hard with that Jeanette Winterson quote where she talks about how product is the excrement of our activism and so I let that make me feel really okay for a while that I didn't have a new album out or whatever, because I was also writing and composing and scoring whole 90-minute theatre pieces and whole albums



worth of music for different productions and I was really feeling songs, so that's been the hard part for me. But I feel more alive and excited than ever to be a performer and have my kids there with me; having their little hands on my instrument and dancing around at my shows and feeding them music. My kids call me Mama Cello. When they hear a cello or an instrument that sounds like a cello they say, "Mama, Mama."

My family is very bilingual and as I learn Spanish my kids are little Spanglish chatterboxes. The other powerful language is music and I've really made sure that I'm putting a strong root of that, of music, being our universal language of the emotions. So that's been really powerful and that's kept me strongly threaded. I also feel like I know that these kids chose me to be their mother, to be their doorway, from the infinite to the finite and they also chose me to be who I am and do what I do. I know, I feel, I sense, that they need that from me.

**Mutha** Are you working on any projects right now?

**Bonfire** I'm working on a project about music and healing and the art of reclaiming homemade medicine during pregnancy. When I was pregnant with my first child I felt that I was really being called to have a very natural birth. If I had had my druthers I would have given birth in thermal hot springs, or in a river, or the ocean. I totally would have done that if I could have, but I knew that a birth center and being in a water tub would be as close as I could reasonably get to that, at least at this point in my life. So I set off on that path as soon as I found out about the pregnancy to get a midwife, find a birth center, and get ready to deliver at the birth center in the water.



At my first prenatal visit, I was in San Francisco at the time, I saw my midwife and she said, "I'm really sorry to do this to you, but I'm going to have to call an ambulance and you're going to have to go to the ER right now." And what she explained was she felt that I had probably miscarried and that I was possibly hemorrhaging inside and that was why my uterus was bloating the way that she felt that it was. It was a total horror fest in the ER room. I basically tried my whole life to stay out of any western medical

establishments at all. I have a lot of trauma and damage around mainstream medicine. It was really sweet though. There was an intern at the midwife's office and she was into Riot Grrrl and knew of my work. She came with me. There are guardians out there in the universal ethers sending us these backup spirits of support.

I had my first ultrasound and I'll never forget the moment I looked over at the screen and there's this little light blinking so fast, and that was my son's heart. She said, "Yep, your baby's here, your baby's fine." This is like around 10 weeks and I remember seeing the tiny little arms going so fast like little hummingbird wings. And I look over and the birth center intern, Riot Grrrl fan is sobbing, and I'm sobbing. Then the nurse tells me that what is going on here is that I have a seventeen-centimeter fibroid, close to the size of a



large grapefruit, in my uterus and it's partially blocking my birth canal. And I said, "Wow, that's going to have to move and shrink for me to have the vaginal birth that I know I'm supposed to have." And she looked at me and said, "Well, I've never really heard of that happening. And I was like, "Well, that's what's going to happen for me," and I basically set off on a journey to make sure that was going to happen and it did. I researched and fully submerged into all kinds of powerful, alternative healing modalities.

When I gave birth they ended up putting me in the front room, it was beautiful with a water tub, but it was the closest to the door in case I started hemorrhaging and they couldn't stop it and had to call an ambulance, but none of that happened. My son was born within six hours of our arrival, just before midnight on the Autumn Equinox. I had an amazing, gentle, beautiful delivery with my partner, Kiki, there in the water tub.

Because of that experience I'm sort of this honorary doula presence in the Southern California, Northern Baja doula and natural birth advocates network. So at some point I'm going to do an album where I work with women during pregnancy to find that song and that music that is part of that journey of them looking for their child and their child looking for them. That journey of bringing them into this world with song.

I'm also working on a music-film project called *Whisper Rapture: A Bonfire Madigan Suite* with the documentary filmmaker, Ken Paul Rosenthal. We are currently doing a Kickstarter to launch production. He had heard these new studio recordings that I have been working on for almost a decade now but had put aside. I had to kind of shelve them to be a mom and also because I just didn't have the funding or focus or active community yet to help midwife them forward. Ken showed up in the form of a midwife for these songs through his filmmaking. I'm just so excited, there's going to be this film, *Whisper Rapture*, that will showcase my music as well as my writing on madness, art, and transformative healing through activism.