What I experienced, and I'm sure what you experienced with your mom's loss and getting pregnant with Nixie shortly thereafter, is how intertwined the connection between birth and death are. Those experiences are so linked in a really beautiful and spooky and magical way I think.

(Amount) Hello and welcome!

I am Amber Magnolia Hill, and this is Medicine Stories, where we are exploring what it is to be human upon the earth through interviews that center on ancestry, herbalism, myth, mind, and magic. And sometimes we dive into motherhood, as well, as in today's podcast with Alela Diane. And music! Myth, mind, motherhood, and music.

Alela and I talk about:

- Her unique name, her feral childhood, and her deeply rooted familial musical inheritance
- The painful life experiences that led Alela to start making music
- Songs that come in dreams, or that contain premonitions or foreknowledge of the future
- And then we move into talking about motherhood and the intersection of motherhood and work and creativity
- We talk about touring as a mom (taking them with and leaving them home)
- Our experiences of weaning our two daughters; we both have two girls
Alela tells the whole story of how she almost lost her life bringing her second daughter into the world, giving her second daughter her life.

And then we close with a little story about how she knew when her grandmother had passed. Even though she was an ocean away, she had the sense that it had happened.

[0:02:10]

Amber: I'm gonna, in this intro, share a little bit about my weaning experience with my two year old. I posted about it on Instagram last night and had a lot of people telling their own stories or commenting or messaging me asking how I did it or to talk a little more on the podcast. So I'll just spend a few minutes here (and, of course, as always, if you're not interested you can skip forward).

So, it just so happens that I weaned both my girls around Christmas time. Since their birthdays are really close in the year just three weeks apart, although they're ten years and three weeks apart, that was around Christmas for both of them. So I just thought that was a neat echo. I just like that they were close in age. There are so many differences in their childhood and my experience in mothering them that I think it's sort of sweet that that symmetry is there with them being weaned at the same time.

But, what happened with Nixie: I've been thinking about it for a while, probably since she turned two, but it just wasn't the right time, and I had really wanted to go until two for both the girls just for all the good nutritional reasons, and for the love and the bonding, and the skin-to-skin contact and I really have enjoyed it for the most part. And I think what happens for a lot of us is that we get to the point where we stop enjoying it so much, and I was getting there. There would be still at least one nursing session a day that I enjoyed, usually, after she woke up either from nighttime or her nap, and she'd be really sweet and nurse for a long time, clearly getting a lot of milk. But then there was the rest of the day where it was more demanding and kind of on and off, and I was starting to get really fed up with those.

We went to a nice Thanksgiving gathering at a friend's house, and she just kept wanting to nurse while we were there, I think because she was so overwhelmed by all the people and the noise. I get that. As a highly sensitive person myself, I'm really attuned to her when we're in situations like that, so I wanted to provide that home base and that comfort for her, but I was also like, I don't want to keep getting my boobs out in this gathering here. And, like, you know there's kids close to her age (although they were older there), and I knew both of their moms had weaned them at two and was just kind of thinking, “I think you're ready to be one of these big kids now, or you're really close.”

So I started thinking about it then, and a few days later a dear friend was over and I was telling her that I was kind of starting to think that way and that Thanksgiving really brought it up. She told me that with her oldest, she nursed him until he was three and she was REALLY ready to be done and had been for a while; she was overwhelmed with it. But her La Leche League leader said, “You have to keep going. You have to let the child totally lead the process.” And she said she was actually, she still has anger towards this woman for that. You know, baby-led weaning sounds great, and me and this other mother think that you should nurse for a good while longer, much longer than the doctors tell people to, but she should have stopped long before then.
So when she got pregnant with her second five years later, she was recommended the book Tears and Tantrums or Tantrums and Tears? And so I got it after her visit. Basically, the point that this book is making is that it's okay for babies and little ones to cry. They don't need to be given whatever they've demanded immediately 100% of the time, especially when you know they're not hungry. So let's just focus on nursing: it's just something that they've just come to want. Obviously, this is beyond the first few weeks or months of life, just sitting with them and holding them and looking at them and reflecting back, “You're really sad. I'm here with you. We're going to get through this together.” And so my friend told this story of when her second one was tiny, like, a newborn, she was screaming and screaming and demanding to nurse, but she knew she wasn't hungry, and she knew she didn't want to establish the patterns that she had with her oldest. So she just held her in her lap, looking at her, close, like, that distance that babies can see you at that age, and was just like, “I see you're so upset. I love you, and I'm here with you, and it's going to be okay.”

Whereas with her oldest she would have immediately just nursed. And she said that all of a sudden, her daughter stopped crying and did that (Amber makes exhale of relief sound) that babies and people do when we've gotten our good cry out and peacefully relaxed into sleep. And so she kind of held that throughout her second child's infancy, and it was so much better for her.

[0:07:11]

Amber: She's an attachment-parenting mom, as am I. I think a lot of people, probably a lot of people listening to this probably vibe with that. But as anyone who has listened to Episode 11 of this podcast already knows, my episode where it's just me talking about motherhood and isolation, and how our ideals just fall apart and how hard it is to parent in modern society, there's room for flexibility within that framework. And you can still love and be close and still do those attachment-parenting type things, which, I hate that phrase; it makes it sound so new? And that's how a lot of people think of it. Like, oh it's the NEW fad of attachment parenting. It's like ancestral parenting. It is how humans and mammals have always parented.

It's just -- I fully have so much compassion of the full spectrum of how moms feed their kids and if they're nursing when it's time to be done. So I was really at the place where I was just wanting to be done. And after my friend told me that, I did that with Nixie and it was probably only two, maybe three times, where she came to me wanting to nurse after that. And I was like, “Nope. But I'll hold you, and I'll love you through all the crying.” And got through it in five or ten minutes, and she was fine. And then she respected my no's much more often after that when she approached me wanting to nurse. (Amber does Nixie voice) “Mama, nurse! Mama, nurse! Mama nurse!” I just -- I was about to lose my mind if I heard that phrase again. And it should be such a sweet phrase, right? But it was just too much. Too much was being demanded of me, and I think physically, too, my body was like, “Let's be done.”

So a couple of weeks ago we went a whole day without nursing, and I thought that would be it. Then the next morning, my breasts were so engorged, and it was the three year anniversary of my mom's death, and I was PMSing and having a lot of big feelings. So when she woke up in the morning and said, “Mama, nurse!” I was like, “Yeah okay. Let's do this.”

[0:09:22]

Amber: But the production really slowed down after that, and my no's became a lot more frequent, and then just four days ago I just decided no more. I think we're actually done now. I feel like a physical revulsion at the thought of nursing again. And so once that “no,” that energetic “no”
became so strong in me it became so easy for me to say no, and she never did the meltdown thing. I mean, she asked over and over a couple of times, but most times I said no, she was like, “Okay,” and moved on. And now we’re done and I feel SO happy. I don’t feel any sadness or nostalgia. I’m just ready to have my body back, to wear whatever I want, to be able to be out of the house at certain times of the day that I haven’t been able to for two years and three months, I’m just stoked.

So I share that because we’ve talked about motherhood a number of times on the podcast and Alela shares her story of how her youngest was weaned that she didn’t really plan for. It was sort of an unexpected thing that came up and dried up her milk supply. And, yeah. That’s why I share that story. Thank you for listening!

And I think. Yeah, I think that’s about it. Oh! One thing is that Alela and I talk about how her song, “The Wind,” has been featured in a previous episode. So this was Episode 6 with Amy Woodruff, if you want to go back and hear that after hearing Alela and I talk about it. Episode 6. And, of course, you can Google or buy any of the songs that Alela and I talk about in this interview, especially “Oh my Mama” because it’s just so relevant to what we’re saying and such a beautiful song.

For Patreon supporters, Alela’s going to be giving away a copy of her latest album called Cusp, which is about motherhood. So I’m going to read a little thing here about this album.

Oh sorry. I’ve got things popping up on my screen.

Patreon is patreon.com/medicinestories and it’s for supporters of this podcast at the two-dollar level really helps to keep this show going and I’m really so grateful to everyone who’s there; it’s a really sweet community, and just nourishes me and nourishes the show.

[0:11:50]
**Amber:** This is from an interview that Alela did in I think it’s called Mother Magazine, she says:

> ‘This music is about Motherhood. Even just by saying that it feels like people will write you off. It’s like you’ve suddenly lost the charm of being youthful and even attainable, you’ve been commoditized as available. There is not a big place in the music industry for 30-something women with kids making music.’ She laughs, as she pauses, then adds, ‘Maybe we can create that space.’

I will link to that article in the show notes for this episode is what I will do. And that is going to serve as the bio for Alela, and we’ll also talk about her childhood and how she came to make music.

So that’s it. If you want to be part of the Medicine Stories Facebook group, go ahead and find us by searching for Medicine Stories. You might have noticed a new logo for the show. I’m so excited about it. I feel like it really embodies the mythic themes that we’re dealing with here, and I love the stars. For me, they represent the ancestors, as so many traditional people thought the stars WERE their ancestors, as the stars actually are our ancestors because all of the elements in our body came from exploding stars. It’s so amazing. And then the redwoods, deeply ancestral trees because they hold such ancient wisdom. And the poppies at the bottom which are evocative of the dreamtime and oh… extra special states of consciousness (Amber laughs). And then the redwoods
and the poppies, too, being such California plants and me coming at you from California. Thank you so much to my graphic designer, Juniper, for the new logo. I love it!

And this will be the last episode before Christmas. I hope you guys have really sweet holidays, whichever ones you celebrate. As I said in the last intro, I absolutely LOVE this time of year. So I’m really in my happy place and that feels good.

And I’ll be back. I’ll be back. I have not done seasons with this podcast, but I feel like, starting with the next episode that will come out, it’s kind of a new season, a new energy has been flowing through me lately, related to this project and this creation. And I’m just really excited about all the new interviews coming up, really grateful for everyone who is here, thank you so much.

One more last little thing: you will hear in the episode that this was recorded three months ago. And so this is part of why I took a big interviewing break because I really just needed to catch up on getting interviews out. So, just in case that’s confusing with things I talked about the intro, and then things Alela and I will talk about in this interview, there’s a three-month lapse there.

Okay. Thank you so much for listening, and let’s get into this interview now with Alela Diane.

(Transitional music: acoustic guitar folk song "Wild Eyes" by Mariee Sioux)

[0:14:53]
Amber: Alright. Hi Alela!

Alela: Hi Amber.

Amber: Thanks for being here.

Alela: I’m glad to talk with you today.

Amber: Yeah, me too. So I want to start out -- this is kind of like three questions in one, but I think they all tie in -- I want to hear about your name, your childhood, and how you started making music.

Alela: Okay, so my name, Alela, is a palindrome; it’s spelled the same backwards and forwards. I was named this -- well, a few days before I was born my mom was quite pregnant, and my brother was three years old at the time, and my dad was giving him a ride on his shoulders, and my dad was like, “Hey Ryan, what’s the horse’s name?”

And my brother said, “La Lela.”

And both of my parents were like, “Huh. La Lela. Alela. That’s a really beautiful name.” And they named me that a few days later.

(Amber laughs)

So it was really stumbled upon and that’s why it’s so unique.
Amber: I love that. *(Amber laughs)*

Alela: Yeah, and then my childhood: I was born in Humboldt County and my family moved to Nevada City when I was about a year old, and the story goes that I was such a difficult newborn. I just screamed all the time, and up in Eureka, in Humboldt County, where my parents were living (they were very, very young when they had me), I just screamed all the time, and they couldn't handle it. And they were trying to live off the land, and my mom was, like, growing all of their own vegetables and doing everything. And with the arrival of the second child, me, who screamed all the time, they kind of threw in the towel on that life. And my mom cut off her very, very long braids and they moved to Southern California for about six months. And my dad tried to have a -- he became a dental lab technician, so he made, like, gold teeth, crowns, that sort of thing. But he, at the time, was 26, and he didn't have a college degree and didn't have anything to support his family, and then after that, they moved to Nevada City.

And I grew up in Nevada City, as you know, where you live a beautiful, sweet, gold-mining town that looks like it’s from a country-western movie. Yeah, I had a pretty sweet childhood there; very much going to the river and exploring the woods behind our house...

And I don't even remember what your third question is now. *(Alela laughs)*

Amber: So your dad is a musician. Is that right?

Alela: Yeah, that's why I became a musician.

Amber: Mhmm.

Alela: Both of my parents were musicians. Much of my childhood was very full of going to potlucks and having all of the adults just kind of play bluegrass music; that was my parents, Mariee's parents.

Amber: -- I'm going to interject here, that Mariee is your best childhood friend and it's her music that opens the show.

Alela: Mhmm.

Amber: From her song, "Wild Eyes."

Alela: Yeah, so my mom and dad, and Mariee's dad were in a bluegrass, several bluegrass bands together, actually. And so that music really kind of inundated my spirit: very rootsy, acoustic music. And then as I got older, that type of music faded out a little bit, and my dad started a Grateful Dead cover band.

*(Amber laughs)*

And then while I was in junior high and high school it was “Deadbeats” rehearsal at our house at least once a week. And so, that kind of *(Amber laughs)* -- I wouldn't say I'm a huge fan of the Grateful Dead, but it's definitely still inside of me because I was subjected to it so intensely.
Alela: And then my own music: I sang in the school choir. I didn’t really participate in my parent’s musicality when I was a kid. I mean, aside from kind of knowing the words to all their songs, I never played music with my parents. I sang in the school choir, and then when I was 19 I moved away. I moved to San Francisco, and I did bring a guitar with me. My dad had showed me a couple of chords, I think when I was 16. And then when I was 19, I moved to San Francisco, my parents got a divorce, which was extremely difficult for my spirit. My highschool boyfriend/your next partner/father of your child. (both laugh)

Amber: My oldest child. Let me put that in.

Alela: Yes, father of your oldest child…

Amber: -- now twelve --

Alela: … broke up with me. My heart was broken. My parents were splitting up, and I started writing songs at that point in my life.

Amber: I was feeling that when you mentioned that the divorce of your parents and the loss of your family home at 20 was big for you ‘cause...

Alela: -- It was. --

Amber: … Yeah, I went through the same thing at 25, and it was -- I knew the divorce was a long time coming, and I was all for it because my dad was just a full-on alcoholic at that point. But my childhood home, I still dream about it almost every night.

Alela: I do, too! I do, too. Actually, I haven’t dreamed about mine in a couple of years I think. But I have written a lot of songs about dreaming of my childhood home. Yeah, it definitely is part of my dream world. And that devastation when your parents split, I think no matter how old you are is always a really difficult thing to process. And that was definitely the case for me and the reason I started writing songs.

Amber: And you found success pretty early on. Were you expecting that?

Alela: I was not. I really started writing music because it was an outlet for me, and it was a way for me to process the grief that I was feeling around all of those losses that I had experienced in that moment. And it’s always been a way for me to process whatever’s going on in my life, so I didn’t know that the music would take me as far as it has.

I started playing shows, and I moved to Portland in 2005. I was in San Francisco, and I moved back to Nevada City which where I recorded my first album with my dad, and then I moved to Portland and started playing a lot of shows to kind of see what would happen. And much to my surprise, my record got into the hands who passed it along to a friend in London and my record came out on a small record label in the US and also a small record label overseas, and it was mostly in England and France that my music really took off. And that was in 2007. And that was pretty surprising and very surreal.
Amber: I remember December 2005 -- this is the first time we met -- me and my ex, who at that time was your ex, but at that time was not my ex; was my current. I was pregnant, and we came up to Oregon to look at a biodiesel van, because we were going to tour the country working on organic farms in our biodiesel van. (Amber laughs) And the van didn’t work out, and we’re like, “Let’s go to Portland!” And it’s like, evening is coming on. It’s raining, and we’re like, “We have nowhere to stay. Do we know anyone? What are we doing?!” We’re like 24 and pregnant, and what’s happening?

And he called you and we stayed at your place, and I remember you -- it seriously gives me chills thinking about it -- you played your new song for us and you yodeled!

Alela: I did?! (Alela laughs)

Amber: It was SO beautiful! (both laugh)

Alela: … Of course, I did! (Alela laughs)

Oh, that’s really funny.

Amber: And I could feel it resonating through my pregnant body, and…

Alela: Wow.

Amber: Yeah.

Alela: I remember when you guys showed up and said you were pregnant. I was like, “Whoa! This is crazy!” I mean, I hadn’t seen him in quite a while at that point. (Alela laughs)

Amber: You were probably, I think you were probably one of the very first people to know, too.

Alela: Yes, I remembered that.

Amber: Like, nobody knew yet.

Alela: Yes, I remember that. I remember that. You were very newly pregnant, and I think you were feeling quite ill. Yes, the nausea of early pregnancy is real.

Yeah. That was a while ago.

[0:24:42]

Amber: It was a while ago, but, you know, I’ve always just loved your song, “Oh my Mama.”

And when you talk about how someday you’ll have a daughter, and -- you know, I was pregnant with a girl at that time, and now I have two girls -- and then when you were first pregnant with Vera, and you announced that it was a girl, I was just like “OH MY GOD!”

Your song came true!
Alela: It did! I remember when I was pregnant, I remember singing that song for the first time after I knew that I was going to have a daughter, and that was a really surreal experience to just kind of know that my song was coming true.

And I've done that a lot of times with songs; it's very weird. Yeah, they kind of -- a lot of them have some strange magic or some strange knowledge that... I don't know. It's weird.

Amber: That makes me think that you're a true artist who's really paying attention to what's coming to you.

Alela: Yeah, I don't know. It's very magical. I've written songs about dreams. I've written songs about sort of premonitions, I guess, in that way. But I think the most magical songs are the ones that sort of I don't have any ownership over. I mean, I don't really have any ownership over any of them, but the ones that I really feel just come out of me suddenly, and I'm like, “Whoa. This song really wanted to exist.”

Yeah, those are my probably most cherished songs I think.

Amber: Yeah, I can imagine.

And, I'm just remembering now as we're talking, in Episode 6 of this podcast with Amy Woodruff, we played your song “The Wind” in full. That's still the only time I've played a song on this show.

Alela: So funny.

Amber: Yeah, will you tell us about that song?

Alela: Yeah, that song is very intense. So, as you spoke about on that podcast with Amy, Amy's dear friend, Cheree, was tragically killed.

And I didn't know Cheree, but after that happened, I remember hearing about it, and it really hit me hard. And I was really spooked by the whole thing, and freaked out, and devastated that something so tragic could happen to a young woman, no different from me or you.

I started having these dreams -- I think it happened twice, at least twice -- The dream was I went down into this kind of basement. I was being called into this dark area, and down there there was a piano. And I remember seeing the piano, and the keys were moving, but there was no one sitting at the piano, sort of like a player piano where you see the song being played, but there's no one there. And I had the intense feeling that that was Cheree, and she was playing a song.

And I woke up and it kind of left an impression on me, and then maybe a week later I had the dream again, and the song was being played. After that, within the next day or two, I sat down and that song really kind of came out of me and I was thinking about her, and it was a song I wrote for her. And also, strangely enough, the chorus, the “I'm on the wind” part, was a piece of this song that my ex-husband, Tom, had written. It’s important to acknowledge that the “I am on the wind…” that was this thing that he had tossed around, and there was this old recording of him doing that. So that song we co-wrote.
So the verse is very much inspired by that dream and Cheri; and that “I’m on the wind,” it felt so connected to the whole thing, and it fit perfectly with the whole story. And he had already written those words, I think about something completely unrelated. And I put all the pieces together, and that’s how the song was written.

Amber: Wow, that’s amazing, that dream you had.

Alela: Yeah.

[0:29:41]
Amber: Um. Yeah, after that episode came out, in which Amy tells the whole story of her friendship with Cheree and Cheree’s death, and how Amy processed it, being seven months pregnant, her best friend’s murder. It’s a really beautiful episode.

It’s just. I love that your song is in it. It’s so powerful, and so many people wrote to me afterwards to say that they got chills when they heard that song. And to thank me for introducing me to your music.

Alela: Aww, that’s wonderful. (Alela laughs)

Amber: Yeah, it’s just very beautiful that you were able to honor her in that way.

[0:30:29]
Amber: Have you had other -- is there more overlap in your dream life and your songwriting?

Alela: Another song of mine, “The Rifle,” which is an earlier song, I wrote that song while I was traveling alone in France, and I was in the South of France. And I was staying in a hostel, and I had a dream about my childhood home. And it was this very intense thing where there was something -- I don’t know what it was -- but something was coming from the woods. We lived on a couple of acres, and there was this wooded area just beyond a field on our property, and it was a very intense dream.

And I woke up, at like, I don’t know, four in the morning in a roomful of sleeping hostel people, whoever they were (because that’s how they go at hostels), and I scrawled down all the words for that song, which is something that I’ve never done before that and never done since then of just, like, waking up from a dream and writing this whole thing down.

So I wrote down all those words, and I fell back asleep, and I woke up some hours later, and picked up my guitar, and I just sang the song, and it was just done. That was it.

Amber: I love that one. I remember watching that video a lot when it first came out.

Alela: Yeah, and, you know, that song I wrote it about my family home, and a lot of the lyrics are true, like, my mom is a painter and my brother literally watched, after my parents got a divorce my mom didn’t want anything to do with much of anything, and she burnt all of her paintings. And my brother, and all of his good friends, they were about 20 at the time, they sat around and watched
all the paintings burn in this bonfire; super intense. And they were all crying. It was just like this sad, sad thing that happened.

But I had this very odd experience recently. When I was on tour in Europe, I was in Amsterdam and I was singing that song on stage, and this flood of intense energy kind of came on while I was singing that song. And I realized that for other people it totally is telling a story of the holocaust, and I had never realized that before. The last line of the song, “There’s too many heavy boots,” and just being in Amsterdam and singing those words, it had an entirely different meaning, and it was really strange that I hadn’t realized that earlier.

**Amber:** Wow. Yeah, I can see it is a heavy…

**Alela:** It’s a heavy song.

**Amber:** And ending.

Hearing music and having a real emotional reaction, it’s making me think of Spirit Weavers in Joshua Tree in 2014, where you were there -- it was my first year of the three years that I went -- and you were there with baby Vera; she was, like, seven months old.

**Alela:** Yeah, she was very little.

**Amber:** And you were going to perform that night, and I was like, “Alela, what are you going to do with Vera while you perform?” *(Amber laughs)*

**Alela:** I was like, “I have NO idea.” *(both laugh)*

**Amber:** And I was like, “Well, I’ll take her. You need someone to take her, obviously.” And I strapped her to me in your baby carrier.

And right as the sun was going down -- you know, she was just screaming and crying, and I just walked.

**Alela:** -- Of course she was *(Alela laughs)*

**Amber:** .. Yeah *(Amber laughs)* I was like, “I’m sorry, baby!” and walked as far away from camp and people as I could get. And it ended up being so magical because we were out alone in Joshua Tree in the High Desert, you know?

**Alela:** Yeah!

**Amber:** It took her, like, ten minutes, which feels like a lifetime when you’ve got a sweet new baby, but I knew she’d be fine, and I just tried to put off that energy.

Anyway, that was super magical.

And then we get back, she’s passed out, and I’m sitting there watching you, sitting next to my new friend, Aemon, and you did another song that’s related to our ex. And it was just this full-circle
moment, where I had this baby with him, and then our lives and relationship fell apart, and even though I initiated it (and it was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made), it was still heartbreaking. And it brought me right back to that feeling of just hating that my family broke apart.

But you were one of the first people who knew we were pregnant with our little, and I’m holding your little girl, and I was like (Amber laughs then makes sobbing noises) completely hysterical!

And then after your performance was over I ran into Amy’s mom, Denny, and she was crying because of The Wind and the Cheree song. It was just… agh, Joshua Tree.

You know what else I really remember about that, too, is you being like “Why do I have my baby in the middle of the desert?” (Amber laughs)

Alela: Yeah, like, this is hard.

Amber: Yeah. Yeah. (Amber laughs)

[0:36:04]

Alela: I took Vera to Spirit Weavers two years in a row: once in Joshua Tree and then the next year, umm, in -- what was the location?

Amber: It was in Mendocino.

Alela: In Mendocino, yes.

Amber: Not the desert. It’s the redwoods.

Alela: Not the desert. And it was really hard to have -- to be camping with a small child. Maybe a little too hard for me. (Alela laughs)

Amber: Yeah, for sure.

I took Mycelia to the Women’s Herbal Symposium when she was just about to turn two. She was the age Nixie is right now, like, a week from turning two. I left after the first night. I was like, “This is… I’m not learning anything. I can’t take a class. I can’t connect with anyone. I’m stressed out of my mind.”

Alela: Yeah, you kind of realize what you’re capable of and when you have to just flee situations with small children. It’s okay. It is what it is.

Amber: So yeah, I haven’t been back to Spirit Weavers since. And I did the Good Medicine Confluence with Nixie the last two years, and I’m not going to do it next. I just… yeah… it’s not.

Alela: It’s a lot for this moment in our lives.

Amber: It is. It’s so intense.
So I wanted to ask you because you were on a European tour, and I assumed you had your kids with you, and I was like, “That’s crazy.” But then I saw a post that you didn’t, and I was like, “That’s crazy, too. That must have been a really hard decision for her to make.”

And how did that work, and what happened, and yeah, I would love to hear about that

**Alela:** We did a tour, actually, I toured with Vera when I only had one child. We took her on the European tour when she was seven months old or seven or eight months old, and I had my husband with me, and I had my in-laws with me. And we rented an RV and that was the solution. Like, okay, we'll do this, and we'll just have a lot of family here to help. And it was fun; a weird family circus vacation where I was somehow also pretending to be a professional musician.

And then a few years later when Vera was two, and I had released Cold Moon, which is a collaborative record I made with my friend Brian Francesconi, a guitar player. So we made this record, and we went on a European tour, and Vera was a very emotional, just a super-sensitive child. She always has been. When she was two there was no way I could fathom leaving her. It just didn’t feel possible.

So we went on this tour, and Toren came, my husband came, and we drove around in a van with Vera who was two, and it was horrible. It was so difficult. It was also, it was in November of 2015, which is when the Paris terrorist attacks happened at a venue all around Paris. And that happened at a venue I had performed at before, and I was on stage outside of Paris that night that it happened. And there was something so intense. That was just a very heavy time to be over there and to have my child with me. It felt really raw, and it was a really difficult tour.

And after that, I never wanted to do that again. I just -- it didn’t feel like it was a good idea for anybody, for me to be dragging my kid around foreign countries, and strap her in the car seat for seven hours a day sometimes. Like, it felt inhumane.

So shortly after that tour, I went to an artist residency for three weeks and I did leave Vera at home, and I wrote all of the songs on my newest record, *Cusp*, which is very much inspired by motherhood. And six months after that, I became pregnant with Oona. And I recorded that album when I was pregnant, and I knew that I did not want to be taking children on tour. So it was a deliberate decision when I decided not to release that album for a year after Oona was born.

So I released it when she was one, and shortly there -- actually, just before she turned one, I went away for two weeks without her, and she was 11 months old. I was pumping, but my breast pump broke. That was horrible. I was in France, and my breast pump broke because of the power difference, and I hadn’t thought of that in advance, so the thing shorted out, and that was super devastating; to be far away, and then I got this horrible hand pump thing, and I’m like hand pumping for two weeks. And when I got home my supply was pretty much dried up, and that was hard. That was probably the hardest thing about deciding to leave my child when she was so small.

Yeah, and then I went again in April. I went for three weeks. It was really good to be able to be back doing my thing and to be able to give myself wholly to my art and to sing the songs night after night. I loved that tour. It was so fun, and I had two other women with me, my friend Heather, and my friend Mira, and so it was very empowering to leave the kids at home. But of course, I missed them!
We Facetimed every day, but I know it was the right decision. And it worked better for me than trying to bring them along. The times I brought Vera with me it felt like I was half-assing both jobs, and not being able to fully give myself to the audience, to really, like, put on a good show being so exhausted from having a jet-lagged kid on tour, so that didn’t feel fair to not be able to put on a good show, and also to make my kid travel so much. It’s just so hard to move your body around every day like that.

So yeah. It’s a hard decision to make, but I feel so grateful that I can still go and sing. And that I haven’t completely sacrificed that or given that up because I have kids.

**Amber:** I really admire it because I lean toward sacrificing myself. *(Amber laughs)*

**Alela:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

**Amber:** And yeah, it was kind of like a revelation for me when I realized you didn’t have your kids with you on that tour. And I was like, God, I respect that.

[0:43:44]

**Amber:** Just right now, I’m really starting to think about weaning Nixie, and I feel horrible. She’s benefiting, and I love her, and it will be hard, but I’m like, oh my God.

I remember, you know, with Mycie what it felt like to have my body back.

**Alela:** Yeah, I feel very happy about having my body back. And this time it’s earlier, Oona’s only 18 months old, and she did nurse a little bit when I got back in April, like, there was one boob who that -- “who”? *(Alela laughs)* -- There was one boob that still had some milk in it, like, a tiny bit. So she would nurse maybe for five minutes once a day in the morning for a while after I got back. And I was grateful for that because it was really sweet.

And maybe a month or two ago it completely ended, and I breastfed Vera ‘til she was two. SO it was a lot earlier. It’s sad, especially ’cause I know that I’m not ever going to do that again; not going ot have any more children.

And, you know, there’s the kind of guilt that comes up of like, “Oh I went on tour, and my supply dried up, and I was giving my baby formula…” but that was the right decision for us. And I have managed to let go -- or, at least, to the best of my ability -- I really tried to dissipate any feelings of selfishness or something, or guilt I have around that because it was the right decision for us, and she is fine, and it is okay that that happened. I mean, it’s not necessarily how I envisioned it happening. I thought I was going to happily pump breastmilk on tour, but what was I supposed to do? The breast pump broke.

*(both laugh)*

It’s like, there I was with engorged breasts in Paris, France, and no baby to relieve me.

**Amber:** And that’s motherhood is your ideals crashing down around you and compromising so everyone survives.
Alela: Definitely. Yeah.

[0:46:01]
Alela: I think, I mean, touching back on music, Oona’s birth was extremely traumatic and something about that and having, I had a near-death experience when she was born, and that has kind of reinvigorated me in just being alive and feeling like while I was on tour in the past, I used to very much kind of resent certain aspects of tour or think it was hard. But this time I was just glad to be there. This is so cool that I’m in London and performing for this beautiful church full of people. I just feel more and more grateful for every day I have after that experience.

Amber: I was going to ask about that. Would you share about your pregnancy and birth with Oona?

Alela: Yeah! It’s related to, touches on what happened with Vera, as well, because it was a similar thing.

I had something called HELLP syndrome when Vera was born, and I had to be induced at 38 weeks.

Amber: -- It’s HELLP --

Alela: It’s HELLP. It’s similar to preeclampsia; you have low blood platelets, elevated liver enzymes, and high blood pressure. And so, obviously, that’s not a very good thing for your body to be dealing with, and there can be seizures and death, basically.

So the solution for it is to induce you to get the baby out of your body because it’s basically your body having a negative reaction to being pregnant. So Vera was born at 38 weeks, and I knew, theoretically, “Oh that was a close call. I have this thing called HELLP syndrome. Whoa. But I’m okay because they caught it early enough.” But my recovery was lengthy and my body had been through a lot.

So fast-forward to my pregnancy with Oona: everything went pretty smoothly, just the normal morning sickness (that was not fun). I’m pretty bad at being pregnant, in general.

Amber: I hate being pregnant.

Alela: It’s just really hard on me. I puke for three months. It’s really bad. So…

Amber: -- Yeah, there’s these sweet moments, but for the most part it is so intense to grow another human inside of you.

Alela: … It’s very intense.

So the middle of the pregnancy with Oona I recorded Cusp, which felt very appropriate because all the songs are very much related to motherhood and seeing through the lens of motherhood. So that was a cool moment in that pregnancy. And then I’m getting more and more pregnant, and it wasn’t until the very end that things got wonky.
I think a few weeks before Oona was born I had a low blood platelet reading, which was the thing that was the first symptom I had with Vera. And when that happened, I just kind of had this gut feeling that like, oh shit’s going down. This is not going the right direction anymore.”

Shortly thereafter, I was advised to have a blood pressure cuff at home because based on what happened with Vera they wanted to watch me closely. And my blood pressure just started kind of inching up. So it went above the threshold that they were comfortable with; I went to the hospital. And at this point, I was 34 ½ weeks pregnant, and they saw that I was getting HELLP syndrome again and they induced me. And she was born just shy of 35 weeks.

And it was really... the birth was okay; it was three hours. And I kept saying, “I just have to do this horrible giving birth thing” when you have HELLP syndrome and you have low blood platelets, you’re not allowed to have an epidural, so there’s really no relief even offered to you. SO it’s being on pitocin with no pain relief, in the hospital, very medicalized, IVs in both arms...

Amber: -- And being on pitocin, I’ll say, for anyone who doesn’t know, super intensifies labor. Like, it sort of puts you into an artificial state of hard labor quickly.

Alela: Hard labor. Yeah, both of my labors were hard labor immediately. With Vera, it was seven hours of hard labor. That was it. With Oona, it was three hours of hard labor, and then she was born. So there’s no easing in; it’s just like all of a sudden you are having the most intense experience you’ve ever had in your entire life and painful.

So Oona was born in three hours of the hardest, most intense labor with no pain relief in the hospital. And right as I was going into labor, they told me that their NICU was full; their neonatal intensive care unit was full, and that they were going to have to transfer her to another hospital as soon as she was born. So that was horrible. I couldn’t even believe it because I’m giving birth to a premature baby, and here they tell me they’re going to take her away the second she’s born.

So I was extremely anxious, but I just had to kind of channel this belief that everything was going to be okay, given the circumstances. And she was born, and they let me hold her for 20 minutes about because she was born breathing, and she was okay, despite the fact that she was five pounds and small, premature. And then they took her away and my husband went with her to the other hospital across town.

And that is when shit really went south for me. At that point, I just started bleeding, and it was super scary. They were giving me everything they could; they were giving me all these weird shots, and pills, and IVs of this and that to try to get my uterus to contract, and it wouldn’t. And I just kept bleeding a lot until the following afternoon. She was born at one in the morning, and the bleeding just kept kind of casually happening at unsafe levels all day. And then, I kind of felt myself really -- it was weird. I felt so weak, and I was drifting off. Also, imagine: I don’t know where my baby is; I can hardly talk to my husband; I’m having those, like, shakes, those hormonal, post-labor your whole body is just shaking (I don’t know if that hits you ever), but that was happening all day. And then I had to go to the operating room and they did a procedure to stop the bleeding. The put something called a Bakri balloon in my uterus to stop the bleeding.
But before they did that -- this is a really gruesome moment -- the doctor came in, did an ultrasound in my uterus and said, “Okay, there’s a really large blood clot in your uterus. I think that that will stop the bleeding if I remove that.” And she’s like, “Do you mind if I just reach in and grab it?” (Alela laughs)

**Amber:** Oh my God.

**Alela:** So she literally stuffed her fist inside of me and grabbed the blood clot, and then I just kept bleeding.

**Amber:** Oh noooo.

**Alela:** It was just like nothing would help, and it was horrible.

**Amber:** ‘Cause your uterus was open, so she could access the uterus? Ouch.

**Alela:** Yeah! It was bad.

And then I went to the OR, they put the Bakri balloon in, and the bleeding stopped. But it was just like horrible hemorrhaging.

The bleeding did stop, and then after that I just remember laying there, feeling so weak. I could not move because I had lost so much of my life force, and I had lost so much blood. Yeah.

And I remember sending prayers up. I’m not a religious person, but I’m a spiritual person, and I was sending up some messages there because I really felt how close I was to the edge. And they did blood transfusions, and it was...Yeah, it was really an ordeal.

[0:56:07]

**Amber:** When did you see Oona again?

**Alela:** I saw Oona the following day in the afternoon.

So we were apart for about 36 hours I think. During which time I was just on the edge, and my husband wasn’t even there. He didn’t even know what was happening to me. My mom was with me, which I was so grateful for.

And then the other eerie piece that left a lasting impression and traumatized me further was that when I went home, Oona was in the NICU for a week. That was hard because physically I was in such bad shape that for me to physically be with her took all of my strength. I mean, I could hardly walk. I was wheeled up there the first few days.

When I did go home, I just didn’t get well. My energy didn’t return, and I just was laying in bed. My mom would bring me food, and I would just sit there and nurse the baby, but my energy didn’t come back the way it had after I had Vera, and I really felt like something was wrong.

At about two weeks postpartum, I used the bathroom and stood up, and there was just blood all over the floor, and we had to call an ambulance. So then I went to the ER, and they monitored me
for four hours and were kind of like, “That was weird. I don’t know why you bled so much. Like, we’re gonna send you home.” And then that happened three more times at home which is horrifying.

And then finally, I went back to the OR, and they gave me a DNC, and they discovered that there had been a small piece of placenta left behind in my uterus, which is why I kept bleeding for four weeks so intensely.

So it was a pretty extreme thing to go through, and it really left me feeling how close I had gotten to not being able to be here to be a mother to my children. It was really traumatic.

**Amber:** Yeah, I mean, giving birth is hard enough! *(Amber laughs)*

Oh my God. Wow. Thank you. I’ve wanted to hear the whole story.

**Alela:** And your Medicine Stories podcast became a birth story podcast.

**Amber:** I would love that! You know I’m passionate about birth and mothers. I’ve wanted to hear that whole story for awhile.

**Alela:** Well, there you have it. *(Alela laughs)*

[0:59:31]

**Amber:** This question came up for me: was -- did Oona have red hair when she came out?

**Alela:** She did not. She had brown hair and jaundice, so we were like, “Wow! She’s so tan, right off the bat.”

*(Amber laughs)*

And then only later we realized, like, once they did the jaundice lights and all of that, she became VERY pale after that. She’s very, very white and she sprouted red hair at about 3 months old and we were VERY shocked. *(both laugh)*

**Amber:** It’s so cute! And where did it come from? Which line?

**Alela:** My husband’s grandmother was a redhead, and my great-grandma’s sister had red hair also.

**Amber:** And were they Celtic?

**Alela:** Umm… Toren’s family, I’m not sure where his grandmother’s from. I know his grandfather was German. I’ll have to ask. I don’t know.

**Amber:** Yeah, I was just --

**Alela:** … I’m English-Irish-Scottish-French, just very European from a lot of different places on both sides.
Amber: Yeah, all my ancestry, too, that you just named, but also Dutch and Manx.

Alela: Okay!

Amber: I was just thinking recently about my freckles because I actually have a lot of freckles. And people talked about it all the time when I was a kid and didn’t really anymore. And I texted my sister, and was like, “Did mom have freckles? Does dad? Do you?”

And she was like, “No. It’s always been you.” (Amber laughs)

Just thinking about how things come up through you...

Alela: -- Yeah!

Amber: Oh I was looking up freckles and then red hair, of course, came up as a part of that. And it really is, you know, only a small subset of peoples who have red hair, especially. And mostly the British Isles.

Alela: Yeah.

Amber: That’s so special. It’s so cute! (Amber laughs)

Alela: It is! It’s really sweet. I mean, we’re glad we have her. We’re glad we’re all alive. It’s just… yeah.

Amber: I mean, yeah, you mentioned November 2015, that’s the month that my mom died, and I got pregnant a few weeks later and was kind of holding what a miracle it is to be alive at all, and what a blessing it is to have any time with the people that we love.

Alela: That is so true.

I think, also, what I experienced (and I’m sure what you experienced with your mom’s loss, and getting pregnant with Nixie shortly thereafter), is how intertwined the connection of birth and death are. Those experiences are so linked in a really beautiful and spooky and magical way I think.

Amber: Yep. Yep. (Amber laughs)

[1:02:43]

Amber: So before we end, I was also wanting to hear more about this story about your grandmother’s passing and when you were on stage.

Alela: Oh yes!

So I have a song called “Lady Divine.” And my grandmother passed away in 2008 and she had cancer. Before she passed, I sat at her bedside and I sang her, I think I sang her “Oh My Mama” and “Lady Divine.”
I went on tour, and I sort of knew that hospice was there and I was probably not going to see her again. I was performing in the South of France I think. It was a festival, and it was open-air, the night sky was out in front of me, and I started singing. I started singing Lady Divine, and this very intense feeling of her, of my grandmother, washed over me, and I felt her there; I felt her presence. And it was such a beautiful feeling to feel her spirit there.

And after the show, I went back to my hotel and I called my dad, and he said right off the bat, “Did you get my email? Grandma died.”

And I was like, “No, I didn’t get your email, but I know. I know that she died. She came and said goodbye, basically.” That’s what it felt like. She had died earlier that day.

Yeah, that’s probably -- aside from my dreams and writing songs related to that, that experience with my grandmother leaving -- that’s probably the most spiritual experience I’ve had in that way. Or the most connected I’ve felt to the other side, I guess.

Amber: Mhmm. I love this. I told this story recently about my dad having a similar experience of knowing the moment, knowing that his grandfather had just left. And he described it in that same way, like, his grandfather’s presence washed over him.

I feel like this is something I’ve heard many times. I like how it’s so beautiful and it’s so powerful. It makes sense to me when it is someone that is an ancestor, someone in your lineage, someone in your family, that you would feel their leaving their body that strongly.

Alela: Yeah, it was a really powerful experience.

Amber: Sounds beautiful! So, you’ve brought up France a few times and I’m just, like, that’s my pure maternal line goes back to France.

Alela: Oh, really?

Amber: Yeah, we call my grandma, Mémé, which is the French-Canadian word for grandma. And it’s so interesting, she’s going to be 97 in a couple months.

Alela: Oh my gosh, she’s so old!

Amber: She’s so old, but dude, she’s so strong. And she got that gnarly flu last year that was killing people, and she got through it!

Alela: She was okay? (Alela laughs)

Amber: Yes! It was awful, but she survived.

Alela: That’s wild!

Amber: She went through breast cancer a few years ago. We used to always joke that she’s never going to die (me and my mom used to).
But I was talking to her on the phone recently and I found out that she spoke French as a child, and I was like, I can’t believe I didn’t know that.

Alela: What?! You didn’t know?

Amber: Yeah, I know her so well. I’ve spent so much time with her in my life, and so, you know, I’ve kind of been following that line a lot lately and finally did get it back from Canada to France.

So do you know much about your French ancestors?

Alela: I don’t. I really don’t. Yeah.

Amber: Do you know any regions? When you’re over there are you like, “Ah, these are where my people are from!”

Alela: I don’t, but you’re inspiring me to find out. I feel like my lineage is so scattered that I haven’t really… I haven’t really gone there yet.

I think for a moment, maybe ten years ago or seven years ago, I joined Ancestry.com, and I started sort of poking around and finding out names and I was really fascinated by it. At a certain point, I think I… I don’t know why I stopped. I haven’t had the time or space for those extracurricular activities (Alela laughs) at this point.

Amber: Totally. Yeah, I have the app on my phone, so I do it when I’m nursing, and that’s all the time I have for genealogy right now.

Alela: I have a really incredible memoir book that my great-grandma wrote before she passed away, and there are some wonderful stories in there about my family. They were pioneers, and they settled in Southern California before the turn of the century. So that is very fascinating, and I definitely… I knew my great grandmother pretty well. She passed away when I was maybe 19 or something like that. But I spent a lot of my childhood getting to know her.

Amber: Oh, I think I remember I texted you when Vera was born, that one of my great grandmothers was named Vera.

Alela: Oh yeah!

Amber: I was so lucky I knew three of my great grandmothers.

Alela: Yeah! I really knew one of mine well of great grandparents.

Amber: And yeah, wow, that she lived until you were 19? That’s… yeah, my last one died when I was 10.

Alela: She lived to be 95, I think. The generations are pretty close in my family. A lot of people had kids when they were in their early 20s. I did not, thankfully. (Alela laughs)
Amber: Yeah, you know, I think about that a lot because, of course, our generation are having kids later, a lot later, and that does put a lot more distance between generations, and so a lot of these younger kids aren’t going to know their great grandparents and grandparents as much.

Alela: Vera and Oona have a set of great-grandparents. My grandparents are still alive, so that’s wonderful.

Amber: Wow!

Alela: And they’re young still. My grandparents are only 81.

Amber: Wow. Whose parents are they?

Alela: They’re my mom’s parents. My mom will be 60 this next year, and her parents are in their early 80s.

Amber: Wow. That is… they did do it young (Amber laughs).

Alela: Yeah, my mom had my brother at 20, and I think my Grandma Sue had her first when she was about 20, also.

Amber: Wow. Yeah, well, I had my kids 10 years apart… Mycelia had four, all of her grandparents, and four great grandparents living when she was a kid just like I did. And now, Nixie, no, not as much.

Okay, let’s close by just telling people where they can find your music.

Alela: OKay, well, you can go to my website: aleladiane.com. My music’s really available in all of the normal places where music is available: the internet, iTunes, Spotify…

Amber: Record stores!

Alela: Record stores… you can order vinyl or CDs from my website. That’s the best way to support an artist.

Amber: And you’re re-releasing The Pirate’s Gospel?

Alela: I am! Yeah, I’m re-releasing my first record on vinyl and CD. Just been working on all the artwork for that this past month. So that will be exciting. I’ve been writing a lot of new songs, too, so there will probably be a new record in the next, I don’t know, two years. (both laugh) Something like that.

Amber: Good. I’m excited to get The Pirate’s Gospel on vinyl.

Alela: Awesome. Thanks so much for speaking with me, Amber.

Amber: Yeah, thank you for sharing these beautiful stories, Alela.
Alela: My pleasure!

(Exit Music: acoustic guitar folk song "Wild Eyes" by Mariee Sioux)

[1:11:38]

Amber: Thank you for taking these Medicine Stories in. I hope they inspire you to keep walking the mythic path of your own unfolding self. I love sharing information and will always put any relevant links in the show notes. You can find my blog, handmade herbal medicines, and past podcast episodes, and a lot more at MythicMedicine.love.

While you're there, I invite you to click the purple banner across the top of the page to take my quiz "Which Healing Herb is your Plant Familiar?" It's a fun and lighthearted quiz, but the results are really in-depth and designed to bring you into closer alignment with the medicine you are in need of.

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For a little more, you can access my herbal e-book or my small online course, and that's all there as a thank you, a HUGE thank you from me and from my guests for listening, for supporting this work. I love figuring out what I can gift to people on Patreon. It's so fun. And I love that Patreon makes it so that you can contribute for such a small amount each month.

I'm a crazy busy and overwhelmed mom and adding this project into my life has been a questionable move for sure, but I love doing it, and I love the feedback I get from you all. And I just pray that Patreon allows me the financial wiggle room to keep on doing it while giving back to everyone who is listening.

If you're unable to do that, or if you'd like to support further, I would love it if you would subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you would review the podcasts on iTunes, too, it really helps getting it into other ears. It means so much to me when I read those reviews. It's, like, the highlight of my week when I check them and see new ones.

People are amazing. You guys are wonderful. Thank you so much.

The music that opens and closes the show is Mariee Sioux. It's from her song "Wild Eyes." It's one of my favorite songs of all time. Thank you and I look forward to next time!