

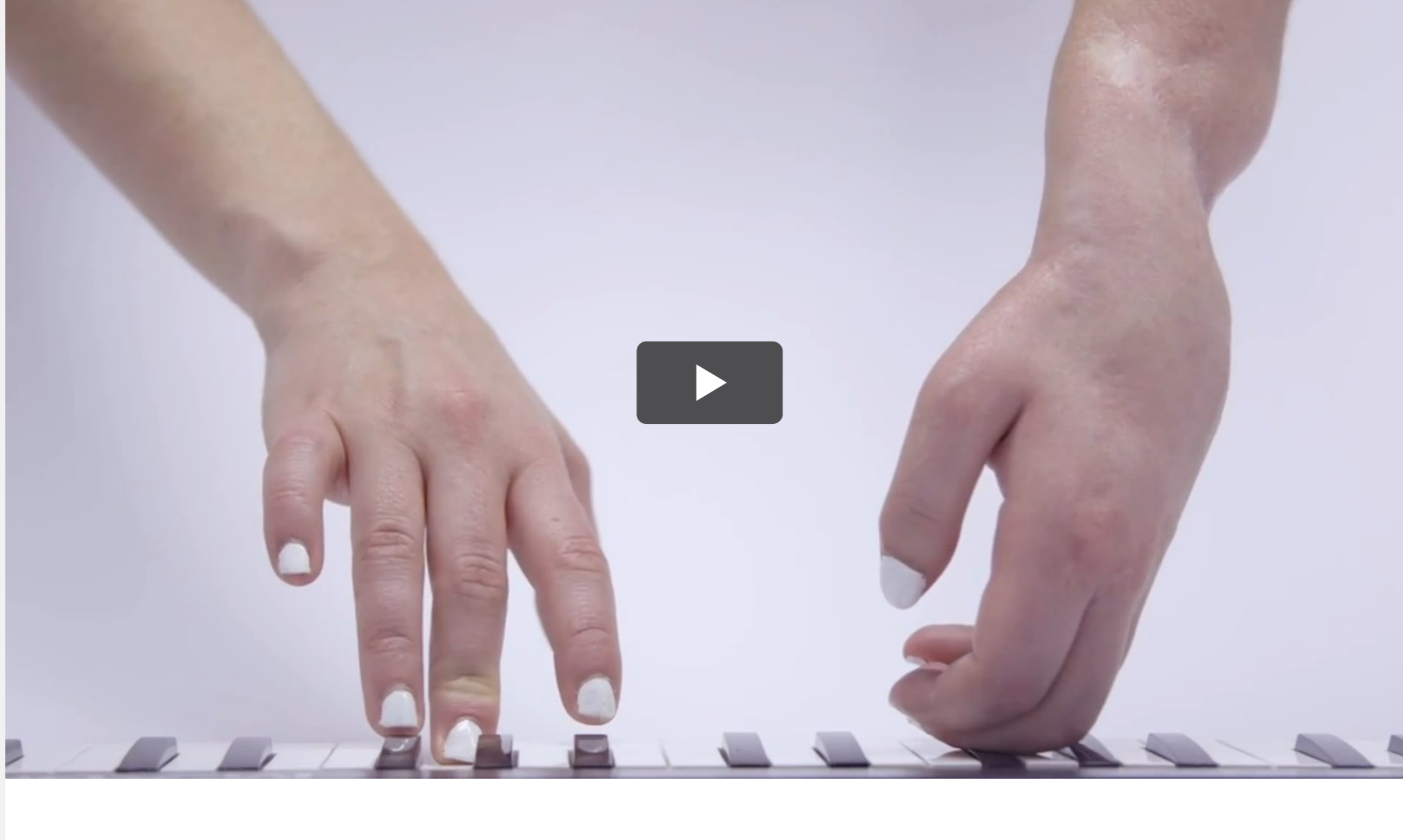
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Shaping a Career Around Vintage Toy Organs

Amara Holstein, eBay News Team

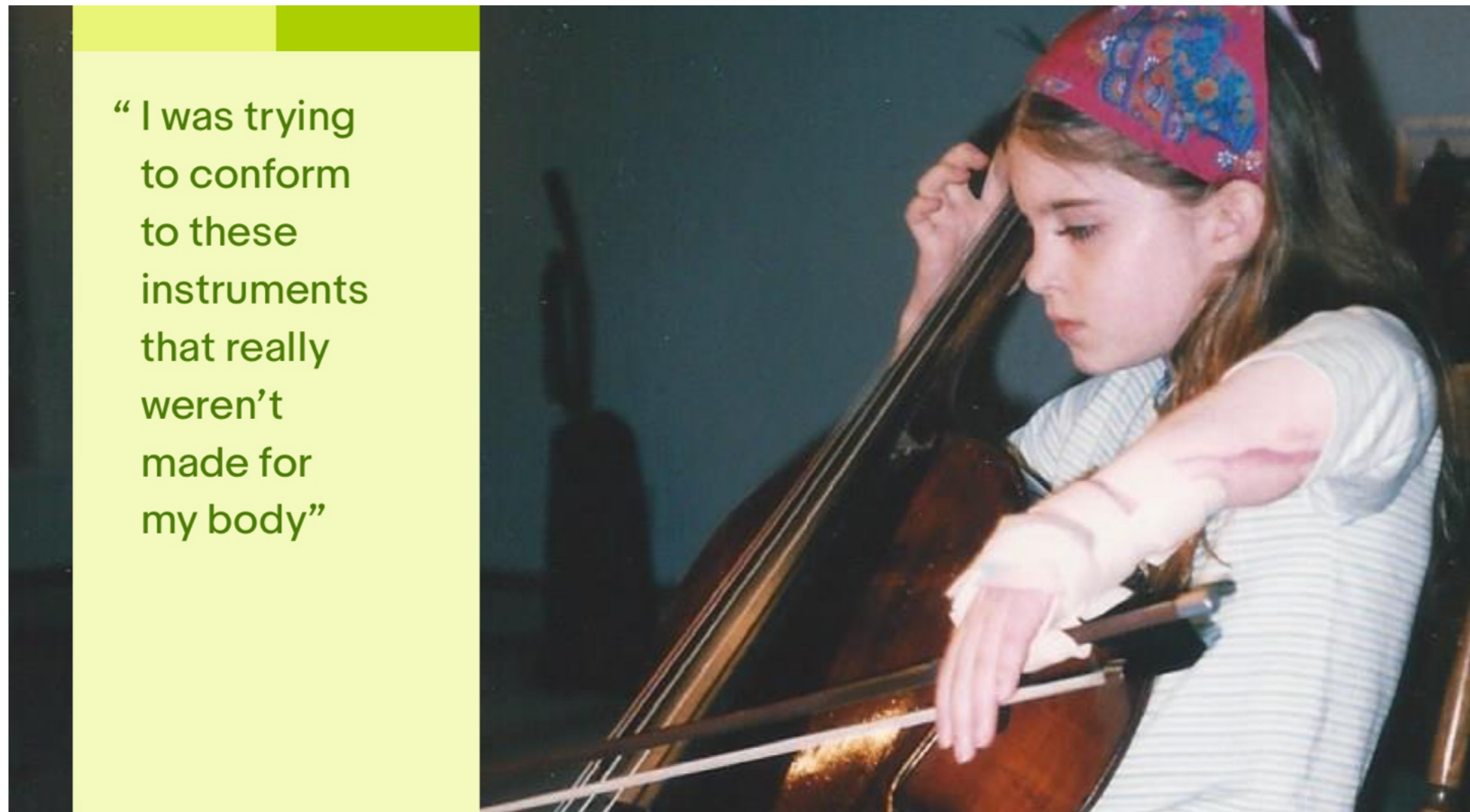
Composer and musician Molly Joyce healed from a life-changing accident through music — and found a new identity in the process.



Music has the ability to touch our deepest emotions — and evoke sentiments beyond spoken words. So when a childhood accident changed Molly Joyce's life, she turned to music as a way to find a new path forward. Nearly two decades later, with her haunting melodies played on vintage toy organs found on eBay, Molly has crafted a successful musical career that immerses her audiences in sound. And in doing so, she has consciously reshaped what some might see as a challenge into an asset. "My work is concerned with disability as a creative source," she said. "I want to make accessibility not as an add-on or afterthought, but an integral, aesthetic part of the performance."

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Molly showed an early interest in music. She began playing the violin when she was only five years old and easily took to the instrument, with music classes becoming part of her regular roster of after-school activities. One day, returning home on a family road trip when Molly was seven, their car swerved off the road and flipped onto its side. Her left hand almost completely severed, Molly was rushed to the hospital.

The following years involved a host of reconstructive surgeries for Molly. Insecure about her self-image, covering her arms with long sleeves and despising gym class, "I had to reexamine my relationship with my own body," she said. "Because with each surgery and each new day of middle school and high school, I was moving farther away from the so-called normative."

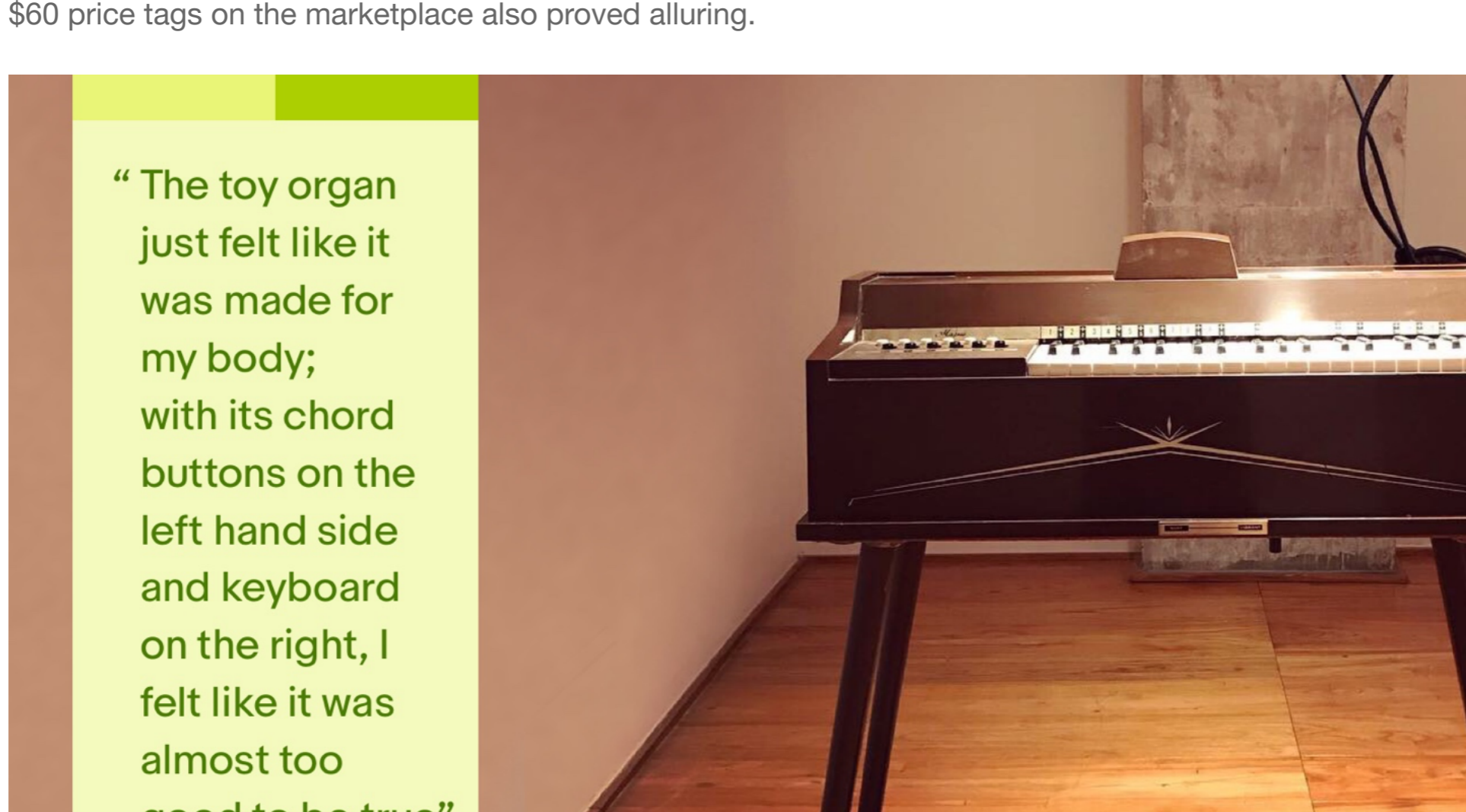


Molly at eight years old playing the cello with her hand and arm still in a splint.

With the encouragement of supportive adults — her parents, her elementary school's orchestra teacher and her physical therapist — Molly continued to play music. She switched from violin to cello for its larger fingerboard and also took up the trumpet, but she never quite felt that either instrument fit. "I was trying to conform to these instruments that really weren't made for my body," she said. "Or, as I like to say, instruments that were made for a very specific set of abilities." Composing music, rather than playing it, became a way to let her imagination run free, outside the confines of her instruments, and she attended the renown music conservatory The Juilliard School after high school for music composition.

As an undergraduate at Juilliard, she happened across an assortment of eclectic vintage instruments such as toy pianos and melodicas at some of her music teachers' apartments. "They're these very cute and unique sounding instruments, I thought they might be a fun accessory at parties," she said, also realizing she might use similar types of instruments to add a more electronic tone to her compositions.

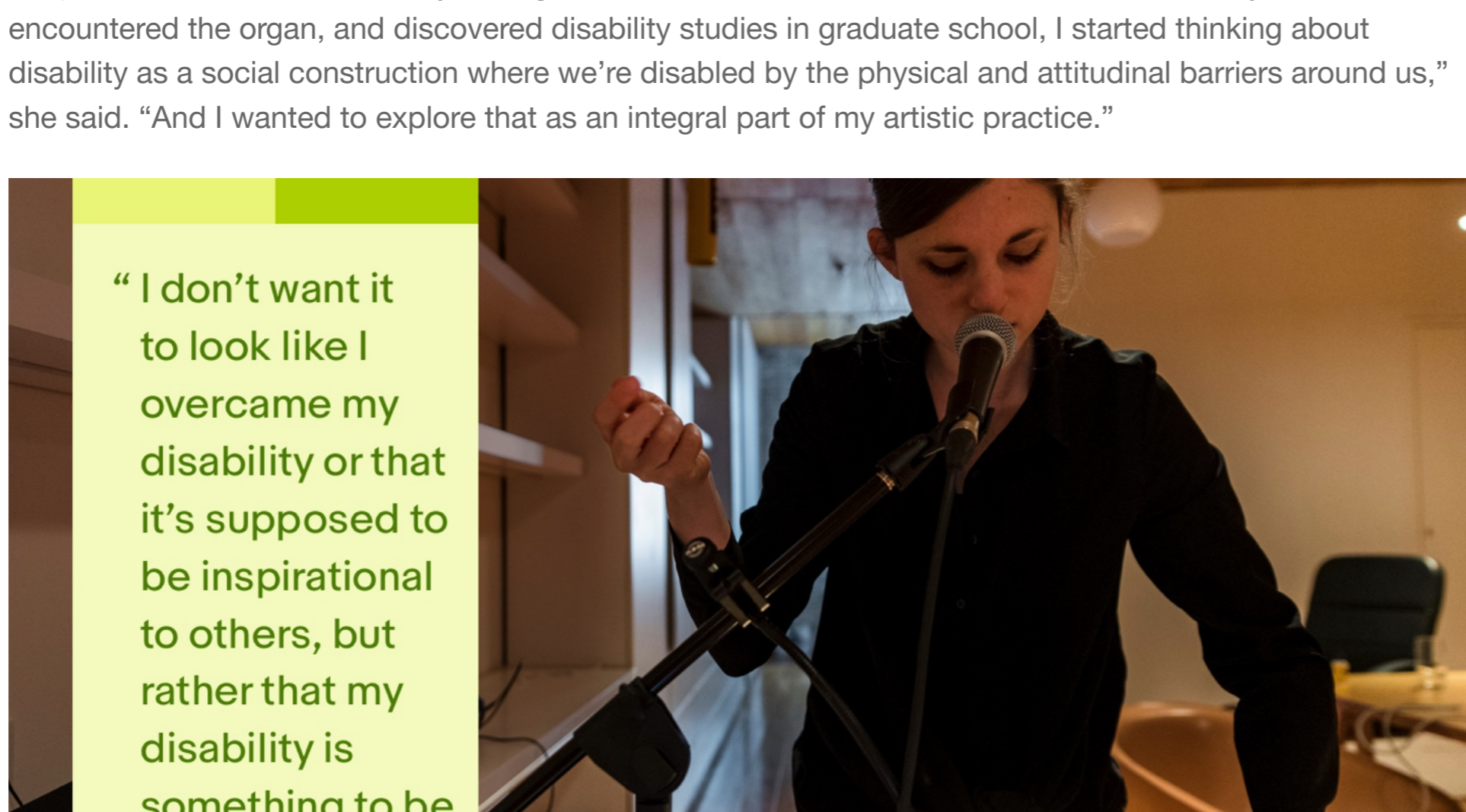
Her interest piqued, she searched for toy organs online. Though few manufacturers were making new toy organs, "I found a wealth of available ones on eBay from the 1960s and 1970s," she said. "A lot of musicians get really interesting instruments and equipment off eBay; it's a great resource, especially for these more vintage and rare instruments." As a college student without much spending money, the organs' \$60 price tags on the marketplace also proved alluring.



One of Molly's vintage toy organs that accompanied her on her artist residency to Shanghai, China.

Molly bought her first vintage Magnus toy organ on eBay, and the love match was immediate. "The toy organ just felt like it was made for my body; with its chord buttons on the left hand side and keyboard on the right, I felt like it was almost too good to be true," she said. "I didn't have to try and make my hands do something they didn't want to do. And I didn't have to modify the organs at all."

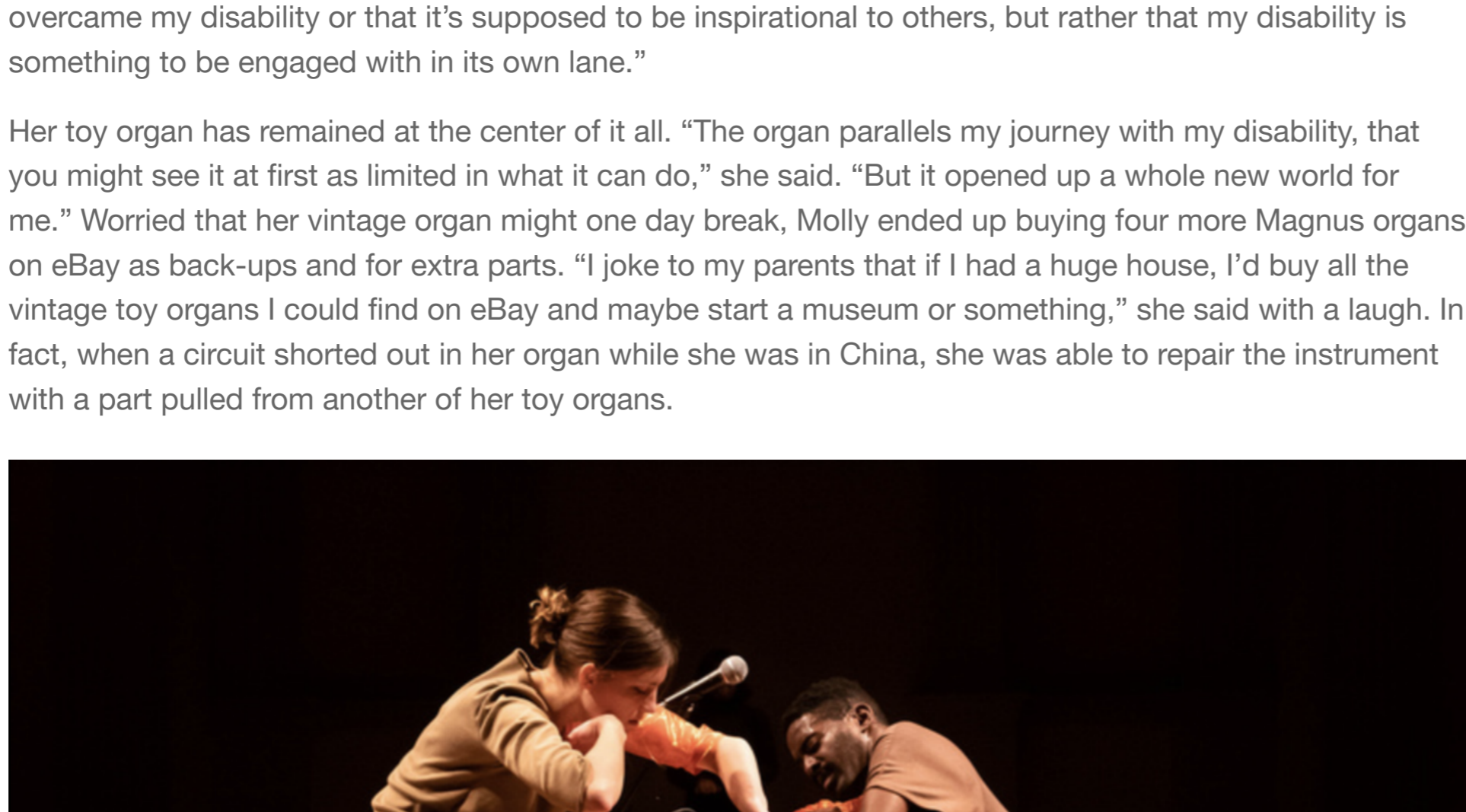
Continuing her studies after college at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and at the Yale School of Music, the organ became central to her musical compositions. Using an instrument that so perfectly adapted to her, rather than Molly having to force a fit, transformed her creative vision entirely. "Once I encountered the organ, and discovered disability studies in graduate school, I started thinking about disability as a social construction where we're disabled by the physical and attitudinal barriers around us," she said. "And I wanted to explore that as an integral part of my artistic practice."



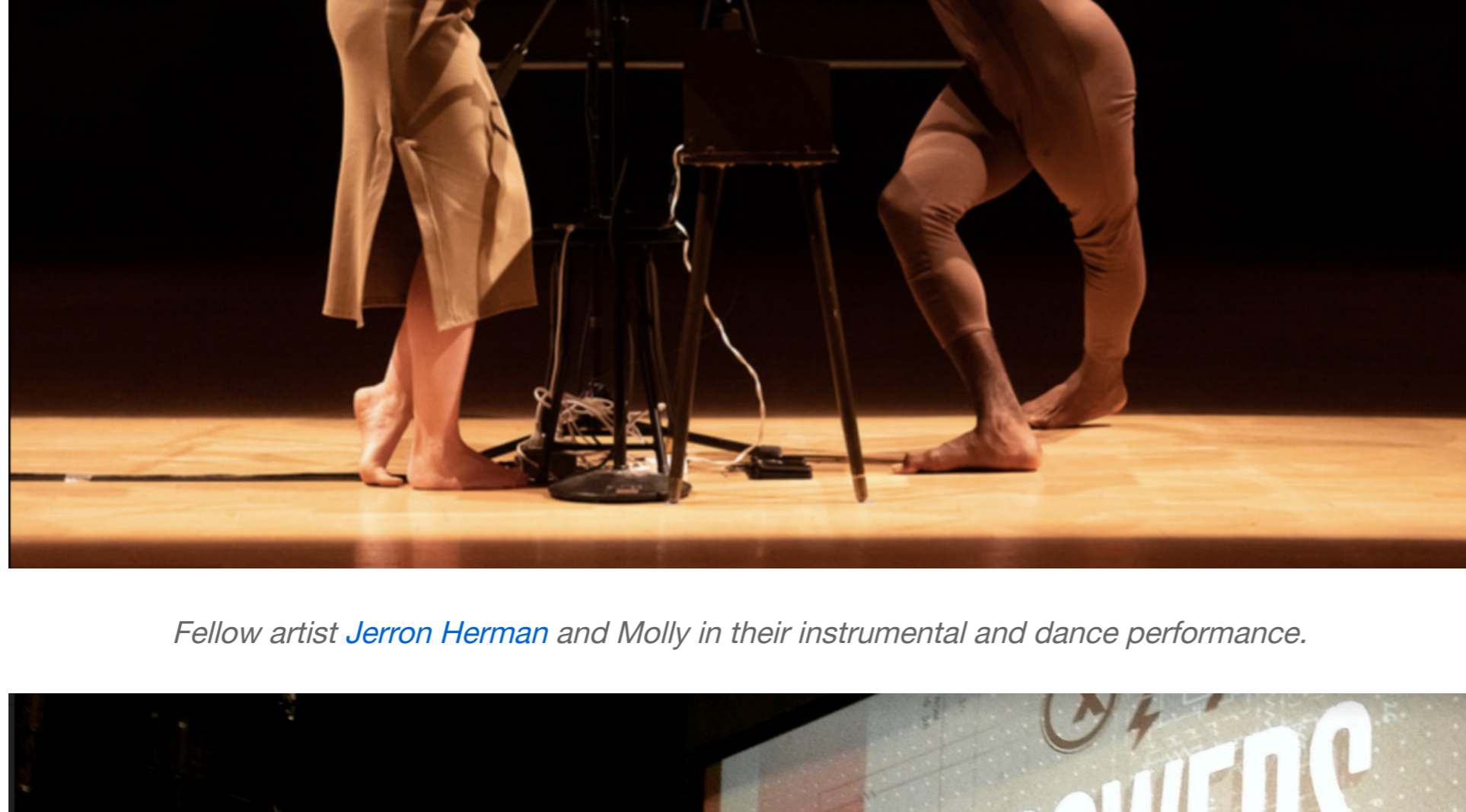
Molly playing her organ alongside speakers and an audio interface.

Through a series of almost a dozen artist residencies that took her to eight countries around the world, Molly set up her traveling studios with recording equipment and her toy organ. Her recently released full-length debut album, "Breaking and Entering," was finished during the pandemic — and encapsulates Molly's creative journey. "It was really written as a personal and artistic investigation, stemming back to the car accident and asking questions about coming into a new body," she said. "I don't want it to look like I overcame my disability or that it's supposed to be inspirational to others, but rather that my disability is something to be engaged with in its own lane."

Her toy organ has remained at the center of it all. "The organ parallels my journey with my disability, that you might see it at first as limited in what it can do," she said. "But it opened up a whole new world for me." Worried that her vintage organ might one day break, Molly ended up buying four more Magnus organs on eBay as back-ups and for extra parts. "I joke to my parents that if I had a huge house, I'd buy all the vintage toy organs I could find on eBay and maybe start a museum or something," she said with a laugh. In fact, when a circuit shorted out in her organ while she was in China, she was able to repair the instrument with a part pulled from another of her toy organs.



Fellow artist Jerron Herman and Molly in their instrumental and dance performance.



Molly's organ standing at the ready for her TED talk.

Between new compositions, giving a TED talk and collaborating with other artists — including a more communally-engaged project titled Perspective, which features disabled interviewees and was initiated through a fellowship at D.C.-based nonprofit Halcyon — Molly continues to explore creative expression through dance, singing and technology. She also hopes to find new ways to translate her own journey into one that's both uniquely personal and highly universal. "I want people to understand that disability is really an identity and you can be with it," she said. "It can be temporary or permanent, it can be acquired or you can be born with it. We should embrace it as a fact we will all inevitably face in different ways. Disability is really an identity available to us all."

Learn more about Molly Joyce, find out about upcoming performances and listen to her music [here](#).

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