

Aimee Mann on writing sad songs



March 20, 2017 - Aimee Mann is an American singer and songwriter who fronted the '80s new wave band 'Til Tuesday. Over the past two decades she has released nine solo albums. Her most recent album, *Mental Illness*, highlights Mann's knack for writing sad songs.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1922 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Mental health](#).

Your name is somewhat synonymous with sad songs. How does it feel knowing that people seem to want these kinds of songs from you? And why do we love sad songs so much?

Most people struggle with a lot of stuff and often we need help figuring out how to deal with our feelings. When it comes to sadness, particularly people who struggle with depression, there is usually this feeling that you're gonna feel this way forever. People need to have hope that there's the possibility they can get out of it, that these feelings will eventually go away. I often think the best way to feel that is to hear the words of somebody who knows exactly what that feels like. That's the value of art or literature, hearing one person saying, "This is what I've been through."

It's very possible to have feelings you can't access and are affected by, but you don't know you have them. Songs, especially sad ones, really help you feel your feelings.

Does making these kind of songs have the same function sometimes as simply hearing them? Is it your way of working things out in your own life?

I don't know. I think there are a couple of different factors to it. Writing a song is like solving a puzzle. Say the puzzle is something like: *What am I feeling?* I feel miserable. Why is that? How can I get out of it? You know, by no means are the songs always about my own particular misery. Sometimes it's interesting to figure out other people's misery but to still write about it in the first person. What is their life like? What is it like to step in their shoes for a minute? I love this puzzle solving aspect of writing songs. It's also been proven by various studies that puzzles are mood-altering. You can't really obsess on your depression and also work thoughtfully and cognitively occupy yourself with something at the same time.

The work starts to take energy away from the spiral you get into and puts it into the construction of something. That itself is exciting and mood altering because it's fun to make something no matter what it is. When I get really anxious and depressed, like right after the election, I was like, "All I can handle right now is a jigsaw puzzle." Literally. I couldn't handle anything more complicated than that, but it occupied me. I would think-jigsaw puzzles and jazz and the Pixies, that's all I can handle. And it did help calm me down. Working on songs, putting together puzzles, it helped me stop thinking all day long, "We're all gonna die in a nuclear war."

It makes sense then that you'd end up making an album called *Mental Illness*.

It makes sense, not just for me to make a record called that, considering my history, but also to be putting out a record right now with that title. Doing things to promote a record right now gives me a sort of funny feeling. Who really needs a record right now? Having said that, I'm grateful that it's this record. Everything is so infused with an air of craziness right now, so talking about sad songs, talking about a record called *Mental Illness* doesn't seem far-fetched.

Do you have a specific strategies for writing songs?

Well, it feels better if I actually have a reason to write. Before writing this current record I'd been writing and recording with Ted Leo. Writing with another person is a totally different thing, you come to rely on the back and forth and having access to another point of view. Going back to working on my own, it just seemed very daunting to write a record again by myself. I'm a big believer in overcoming dread and procrastination by just breaking everything down into small steps, so my goal was just for 15 minutes every day to pick up a guitar and just play around for a little while. If you come up with something, great! If you don't, when that 15 minutes is over you can get up and go do something else. You've done your job today.

Often with songwriting I feel like my job is just to sit there. Maybe I'm listening to work tapes, maybe reading through old notebooks, maybe playing some chords, or humming a thing or maybe sing a song to your cat... it doesn't matter. Just do your 15 minutes no matter what and you're done. Eventually, out of those little 15 minute work sessions, you'll hit on a thing and think, "Oh, I kind of like this." Then 15 minutes will turn into an hour and then that will be the song you're working on. That is how I've worked in the past and that was kind of how I did it for my most recent record and it proved to be very satisfying. You have to just

show up and give it a try. If you wait for some big inspiration, you could be waiting for a long time.

I'll tell you something else I do... I think this is actually really fun. If I *really* feel stuck or just can't seem to make anything happen during my usual 15 minute routine, I'll do this thing that I call iTunes roulette. I will open a dictionary at random and pick a word and then I will enter that word into the iTunes search. The first song that comes up, no matter what it is, will give me my tempo and my style. Usually if you search a word in iTunes it will also suggest an audiobook, so if you click on that you can usually see or hear a sentence. Within that first sentence, whatever it is, you have to use something—either a phrase or a few words. Then I write down a bunch of different chords on pieces of paper and throw them up in the air. Whatever lands face up, those are my chords. You've got a tempo and a style, you've got some words, you've got some chords—good luck! Of course as soon as you play the chords it's usually like, "Ok, fuck it, I'm throwing this chord away and I'm gonna add this chord instead" or whatever. You can do whatever you want because it's a made up game and the rules are all arbitrary, but it really does get you started and sometimes that's all you need.

When it comes to songwriting, recording, and playing shows, is songwriting your favorite part?

Songwriting is my favorite part for sure. Other things have their charms, they're fun, but I think the songwriting is the best part. I like playing live but there's technical things that get between you and just really doing it. For me, I don't sing very loudly so I have to have the in-ear monitor system and sometimes that doesn't really work very well. You can get distracted by a million things—like the sound is funny or there's a clapback that comes from the back of the club or someone's talking really loudly in front of you. There's always something that can continually throw you off from being inside of it, whereas with songwriting—especially early on—you're just *in* it.

On Twitter, you refer to yourself as a wannabe musical writer. What's stopping you?

Well, I am working on a musical, but the process is really sporadic. One of my records, *The Forgotten Arm*, is kind of a concept album, so I'm working with a director of musical theater to turn that into an actual musical. It's just that everyone I'm trying to collaborate with is also really busy. I'm also writing new songs for it with my producer, Paul Bryan, because I knew if I didn't have a collaborator I would just never do it. It would never happen.

That's another trick for getting things done—collaborate with someone who will force you to finish. So at the moment we have an outline and various drafts and the project is enjoying a very long gestation period. It's a collaboration with people who don't live near each other and are all very busy, so it could take years.

I definitely think one day it will happen though. At some point soon I'll sit down with my 15 minute timer and see if I can really rewrite a bunch of songs with this project in mind and figure out what songs could go where and which songs would work specifically for the action of the musical.

Over the past year me and my husband started doing thing when we'd have people over to our house—a kind of talent forum, we call it. When there would be around 8 to 10 people over, too many people for everyone to have the same conversation but not quite enough people for everyone to break into little groups, I thought we should just all perform something, that way we don't actually have to talk. It's the perfect antisocial response to party planning. So we'll do this for people's birthdays or whatever. The bar is set very low, by the way. It's like—read a poem, tell a story, sing a song. It doesn't matter how good you are, just have fun with it. We did this for Tim Heidecker's birthday and it somehow lead me to writing parody songs for my friends. Writing dumb parody songs has been really good practice for writing specific lyrics for specific situations, which is what writing songs for musical theater requires. I think when I sit down and work on songs for the musical it might be a little easier for just that dumb reason.

When you say parody songs, are you talking about a Weird Al sort of thing? Like, you take a song and re-write all the lyrics?

Exactly. For the last one, Tim had written a song that was a parody of a Bob Dylan song and he had written it a couple of years ago when people were saying that Bob Dylan was gonna perform at the Super Bowl. So he wrote a song called "Running Out the Clock" where he sings it like Bob Dylan and it actually sounded like it was him. But here's the thing... it was really a great song. So I wrote a parody of that song that was about how Trump supporters are attacking Tim online and I called it "Liberal Snowflake Cuck" instead of "Running Out the Clock." Anyway, it was really dumb and I can't believe I'm telling you this. I need to have some secrets. But I will say that writing parody songs is actually pretty useful in that makes you understand how songs actually work. You don't understand how good a song really is until you start trying to take it apart. So there's that—can't write a song? Go parody one instead. You'll still learn something.

Aimee Mann recommends:

The comedy of [Paul F. Thompson](#)

[Out of the Cool](#) - The Gil Evans Orchestra

[Springbok jigsaw puzzles](#)

John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee detective series

The "Hidden Brain" podcast on NPR

Name

Aimee Mann

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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