On healing over time



Musician Angelo De Augustine discusses doing exactly what he wants, taking care of himself first, and finding angels in plainclothes surrounding him.

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As told to Laura Brown, 3253 words.

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I know you grew up in a musical environment. I'm curious if you remember the first time you made something, and what that was?

If I look back, probably I was around five. I remember making up little songs while movies were playing, when I'd be at the movie theater… I probably didn't think of that as actually *writing* a song at the time. When I was like 14 I got a guitar from a family friend. My uncle had played, and I wanted to be able to write some songs on my own. I pretty much started writing songs right away, which probably is not as common as what most of my friends have told me. I was writing songs right from the get-go, I think because I already grew up around a lot of musicians, and because both of my parents did that for their work. So it wasn't a big deal to write a song in my household; it wasn't weird or special, it was just a normal thing to do. Maybe that's why I had the confidence to do it right away.

Do you remember if you were keeping stuff to yourself at first? Or did you start sharing with other people pretty quickly?

I shared relatively quickly. I was homeschooled, so in high school I didn't really have a lot of friends to share it with. But there was this group of kids that would put on little concerts at each other's houses, and everybody would sort of share the songs they were making. I remember doing that a few times, but not a ton, mostly because I shared them with my mom or something.

On the new album, there's lyrics that talk about childhood and the past—I'm thinking of, "all your life's a distant memory, freckles on your cheek." Or, "tomorrow you may recall yesterday wasn't there at all. Time left you when you were small." Are there ways you still feel connected to how you were as a child?

I feel like I'm getting closer to connecting with that again. I feel like right now I'm in this in-between stage of trying to find my old self again. I've been through a lot these past four years. I've been on this healing journey after everything happened to me, and for a long time I felt like I was a completely different person, or like I wasn't a person at all, just a ghost walking around. So I'm slowly starting to find that old version of myself that's, you know, *me*. I've always been the same since I was a kid. Pretty much anyone that knows me knows that I haven't really changed much… But it's a process, it's a journey, and it isn't necessarily a line. It's one where you move forward, and then you maybe experience dips, and move a little back, and then you move a little forward, and then you move a little back. But you're constantly trending towards moving forward. If you look at it over time, you can see that you've actually moved forward, but it just exists as a very slow and nonlinear process, which I've never experienced. In a sense I'm getting closer to myself, and in a sense I'm still looking for myself. And that's what a lot of this record is, is a reflection of my journey and trying to find myself again.

The name of your studio where you recorded the new album is called A Secret Place. I'm curious how that name came to be, and what your relationship with the word "secret" is?

I think it was initially a joke, because I had to come up with a name, and I didn't want to have a name for it, I just wanted it to be a secret. Somebody said, "You should just name it A Secret Place, because it kind of sounds funny." It doesn't really sound like a studio… It's a private facility, it's not really a commercial facility. But it's a recording studio that's my own, or for friends if they want to use it, but it's not open to the public.

When I heard it, I wondered if maybe there's something that you're trying to protect within it.

Well, sure. I feel like I'm always trying to keep my relationship with music as pure as I can. Obviously we're in the music business, so there's the business side of it, too—whenever you make anything into a business, there's a danger of losing some of the purity of it, because you're commodifying something. I found that I have to keep real strict boundaries around what I let in, and who I let in, so that it feels yours. I want to keep doing it, because ultimately I feel like most people who get into music, who like making songs, get into it because it's the way that they express things the best, or the way that they know how to express things. It isn't necessarily to be famous or something like that. It's because it's important—it's the making of the music that is important to them in some way. With all that stuff being said, I definitely do skirt that line between sharing things and also keeping things to myself, to keep it sustainable for me and so that I want to keep doing this.

How much of your internal world do you feel like you can access through your work? Does it feel like you can translate it into words and melodies, in a way that's complete, even if it's only temporarily?

If I could just express what you can express in a song with words, I probably wouldn't write songs. The song is a song. People always ask people to explain songs, and I think it's silly, because the explanation of a song is the experience of listening to it; it doesn't get any more clear than that. And obviously it's going to be different for every person, because everybody's going to have different feelings or emotions they're going to feel. But that doesn't necessarily mean it's true or false, objectively. It just means that for each person it's going to be a certain thing, and so it's true for them.

Songs can do things that words can't, because the song is the words, but it's also emotion, and it's music, it's vibration. It's a whole experience, and I can never express those emotions in a different way other than writing a song. That's the way that's easiest for me. I imagine it's probably different for everybody.

I was really moved by the short film you made, "Can I Come Back to Earth?" I read that typically once you finish a project, you tend to move on rather than look back too much. But in the beginning of that film, we watch as you move by these images that connect to your past work. Do you like having physical reminders of your past selves around you?

That's a good question. I don't know if that's a conscious thing. But it does appear that I have those things around me… Most of the choices in that movie were the director's choice of what to shoot and what not to shoot, and maybe he just found those images more interesting than others. I'm not really sure. But anybody's house, I would think, would contain things that remind them of certain memories or parts of themselves.

There's also a piece of it where you're leaving those things behind and going into an empty hotel or swimming alone. Is there a feeling that connects to that?

Well, one of the things that was really helpful for me, since I've been going on this healing journey, was doing some of my own research into what I could do to help myself. Because the doctors didn't give me any real answers or ways to help. They weren't able to diagnose anything, and they weren't able to tell me what I could do to help what was going on. So I did a lot of research of my own—and I obviously am not a doctor, but I think that a lot of what I've been dealing with is related to the nervous system. There's a lot more evidence and research coming out about the role of the autonomic nervous system, and chronic stress and fear plays on the nervous system, and how your brain wires can get crossed, and they can create chronic symptoms that don't really make sense.

There’s something called the allostatic load. Everybody has it, and it’s sort of the ability that the brain has to come back to homeostasis, and the nervous system to come back to homeostasis, sort of like this line. If you cross that line, you can be thrown into a state of fight or flight, where the brain can’t communicate to the nervous system that you’re safe, and to go back to homeostasis. So it gets locked in this state, and that can cause symptoms that seem to be mysterious and unexplainable, and difficult to go through. The good news is that you can rewire those pathways in your brain by teaching yourself that you’re safe. One of the things that I did was I joined a spa, and they have all these swimming pools. Almost every day for a long time now, like four years, that was one of the things that was helpful for me. When I went in the water, my symptoms would go away. It shows a direct correlation to nervous system regulation. Being in the water, for most people, can be relaxing. You go on a walk somewhere in the forest, or in nature, wherever it may be, and then all of a sudden the symptoms go away. I put that in the film because I wanted to show something that was helpful for me, but also to make space for showing where I’ve been, where I was, and where I’m heading to, which is a place of healing.

After I joined the spa, the other thing that I did was I joined this program. It’s difficult to describe, but they call them neuroplasticity or brain retraining programs. It’s based on this concept that we’ve known for a long time—since the 70s, actually—that the brain is, in a sense, malleable and plastic. It’s not set in its ways. That’s how we can make changes, in our personal lives, or our internal lives. We can make these changes because the brain is constantly growing, changing… Even if wires get crossed in the wrong way, like what has been going on with me for a long time, it’s possible to rewire that part, so that you don’t experience those symptoms anymore.

The song of yours that I feel most grateful for is “27,” which came out when I was 27 years old, and that year was filled with a lot of physical pain and uncertainty for me. The one thing I really chose to do for myself was swim, which connected me back to my childhood. I don’t think I realized this at the time, but that was a sense of safety.

Maybe similarly,so much of this new album seems to believe that love is the thing we can rely on. I am curious if that’s something you’ve always believed. Did you always feel that love was steady, either the love that you gave or received?

Whenever you go through something that tests you beyond what you think you’re capable of enduring, it changes you. It just made me appreciate so many things that I probably overlooked. When you go through something really hard, you feel that you’re given a second chance, and you feel so incredibly grateful to be alive. In my case, my priorities have totally changed. For most of my life, my priority was that I really wanted to be a great songwriter. It was kind of the only thing that I really cared about. I probably paid the price for that. I worked myself too hard, and I got too stressed, and I just don’t think it’s worth it, even if you were to attain something great. If you don’t have your health, if you’re not feeling well, then none of that stuff matters.

I just think that it’s so important to take care of ourselves. That’s kind of the only thing I care about anymore. Like I obviously care about music, but I care about myself more than making a nice song or something. It’s something that I had to come to in my own time.

I want to ask you about the opening line of the album, which is, “Where do you run when your life’s on the line?” Then there’s also a line in the song “Pictures on My Wall,” which is, “When you’re pure of heart and on the run.” There’s this sense of urgency there, of needing to find something to hold on to. Does that feel right? And I’m also wondering what helps you slow down or helps you trust that you can.

In my journey, I found that certain connections and certain things showed up for me. Sort of like an angel in plainclothes, you know. It could be a person, it could be a symbol, it could be a spiritual practice, it could be whatever you want. But it’s something that shows up for you in your time of need, that you don’t necessarily expect, but helps to tell you that everything’s going to be okay. It helps to affirm to you that things aren’t good, but life’s *going* to be good. Life is going to ultimately be good. I definitely had symbols that showed up for me. And I had people in my life that showed up in really terrible ways, and then I had people in my life that showed up in really amazing ways. The people I kept were the ones that were supportive. Also it’s just about taking priority, making my wellbeing a priority over other people, over career, over anything, really.

Strangely, in our culture we're taught to suppress our own feelings and take care of other people. A lot of times people view taking care of yourself as being selfish, which isn't true. If you're not okay, you're not going to be able to be there for anybody or make the world nice.

Do you feel comfortable sharing any of those symbols that showed up for you?

I feel like the Virgin Mary was something that showed up for me a lot. I had not much prior knowledge about the Virgin Mary, but there was one near my house, and it would be somewhere that I would go… I have a necklace that I still wear of her on it, for her protection. I think the reason why I was drawn to it is I was drawn to the idea of a mother, because I grew up with a single mother, and I know how amazing moms are, and how the act [of mothering] in itself can be. I've always been more drawn to women, since I was a kid. So maybe that's why it felt more safe to me to go to a symbol like that.

I want to go back to your relationship with your body. How present do you feel in your body when you're working, and has that changed over time?

For a long time I couldn't hear or see very well. I couldn't play the guitar really at all, or sing. So it's been a very slow process of introducing it again… With me, there was no structural damage to me or anything like that. It's the brain that creates these things. And so what you do is you very slowly introduce safety into being able to do these things—like, I *can* play the guitar, or whatever it is you want to. You do it with ease, so you don't overdo it, or you do it just enough. Then you push it a little bit more, and a little bit more, and sometimes you have a dip where you go back… It's this very long process of learning how to do everything again.

Can you feel when you're pushing yourself too hard?

I find that's harder to know. They say you want to test it, but you don't want to totally drain yourself. It's this balance, like anything in life… You have to also listen to yourself, but it's not easy. Sometimes you don't know when you've pushed yourself too far.

Your work often feels shaped by the spaces you're in. You use objects and sounds that already carry meaning, and it's almost like you're discovering what they could become. Do you think finding the right tool—or even the right limitation—is a part of the creative act itself?

I feel like the writing, and the arranging and recording, are two different paths. That's what it feels like to me. Historically I've always sort of done everything on my own, in terms of the writing. But then I also record or engineer them, I arrange them, and then I play all the instruments. It's a very kind of self-contained thing, and so it can be a lot. That's why with this record, I brought in some other people, just because I needed some extra help at the time. I needed a little extra support, for people to play things, because I wasn't feeling well enough to do some things myself.

I sort of had to teach myself to do a lot of this stuff that's not natural to me, like the technical side of it. Learning about all the technical sides, things like compression ratios, all this gobbledygook kind of stuff. I've forced myself to learn it because it makes me more self-sufficient and it decreases being potentially manipulated in some way. It allows you to retain ownership of your work, which falls under that same kind of thing, too. In my career, I do what I want. That's what I've always done. I don't do something because somebody else tells me to do it. If I couldn't do what I wanted to do, I just wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do music. The most important thing is still the songwriting to me. I think if you don't have a song that is real strong, as far as I'm concerned, you don't really have much.

What are you finding comfort in these days, or what do you find yourself facing toward?

What's helpful to me is to try to stay day to day, one day at a time. A "next right action" kind of a mentality, to not get too far ahead into the future with worries or things like that. Just to focus on my program that I do, and the good things that I do for myself, and to keep on this path where I hope to end up feeling like my old

self again. That’s what I’m moving towards. And even though it’s slow, I think it’s possible to get there.

Angelo De Augustine recommends:

The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame

Gustav Holst’s “The Planets”

Snorkeling

Trout Fishing in America by Richard Brautigan

Get off the internet

Name
Angelo De Augustine

Vocation
musician