On asking for help



Singer-songwriter Jensen McRae discusses toeing the line of autobiography and metaphor, rejecting drama on the social media timeline, and returning to the art she fell in love with as a child.

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As told to Elena Saviano, 2288 words.

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We're both Los Angeles natives, and witnessing these fires has been completely heartbreaking. How have these recent events impacted your creativity? Have you felt a stronger impetus to make work, or has it been difficult?

I've been very fortunate that my home and my family's homes have all been safe. I evacuated by choice. I did write a song and, inexplicably, it went viral and got a lot of really positive feedback. I understand that when you post something online, there's the possibility that a lot of people will see it, but every time I post something, my expectation is that it's going to get 20,000 views. So the fact that it now has over a million on Instagram is baffling to me. I'm getting ready to put an album out and generally I've been thinking about my own creativity. Even before the fires started, I was thinking that I should probably give myself a little break on output. Obviously if I have ideas, I'm going to write, but there's no need to be on a constant churn of output in the same way. We've all been forced to slow down, and I don't think that's a problem at all. I've gotten a lot of comments that are like, "Oh, I cried to this, and then I could go back to work." And I'm like, "Oh, perfect." I think that's my job, now and always. I want the people who do really important jobs to listen to my music, get their feelings out of their system, and then focus on saving the world or whatever.

The social media space is so charged, and a lot of what you write is very vulnerable, though not always autobiographical. What is your relationship to posting? Have you conditioned yourself to be okay with this kind of openness?

I am told that when I was really, really little, I was really shy. My parents put me in a musical theater when I was 6, and I pretty much immediately came out of my shell and started writing music. I think I wrote my first song when I was 8. I was a weird kid, and I didn't do well socially until I got to college. I was either the only Black kid or one of a couple Black kids in every class I was in. In high school I did improv and slam poetry; those are not universally received as cool activities. So I was already this social outcast, and I somehow thought that making this really vulnerable bid for attention would go over well. I think I just conditioned a sort of numbness towards people's negative reactions to my music, because that was what I got. Everyone would ask me what my backup plan was when I said I wanted to be a musician. And now, I'm obviously dealing with the opposite thing.

What a shift.

It's a huge shift. The novelty hasn't worn off… And to your point, I think part of what helps me get through this is that it's not purely autobiographical. It's a real sleight of hand. Obviously I'm drawing from my real life experiences, but I'm shifting timelines. I'm combining characters. And that, to me, is the most important thing you can do in songwriting: write something true, but don't worry about the facts.

Does your approach to writing change when manufacturing a fabricated narrative? The song that most readily comes to mind is your recent release "Massachusetts." It's so honest.

There was a period of time where I was posting original music on Instagram almost every single day. Frankly, I knew my job was to post on these apps. It was completely unexpected that "Massachusetts" was ever even finished or ever even came out. I was basically competing with myself, of how many personal details about this person I could put in the song. Because—and I can't stress this enough—I really thought no one was going to see it. One of the things I like to do is write completely in metaphor. It's about something, but it's written in very, very cloaked language. And people like gimmicks. To me, the joy of songwriting is on a word level. What words sound good and what arrangement of words sound good and what feels good to sing and what would be satisfying to read out as a poem and not just be sung.

You also publish writing on Substack. Can you tell me about how that work either diverges from or aligns with the songs that you write?

It's mostly essays. I've written a couple essays about chronic illness and my experience with that. That's both personal reflection and sometimes a call to action. I've written a little bit about pop culture, too. In the fall, I was doing a little short fiction series. I did four short stories that were all vignettes of the same plot. Other than with the fiction, the essence of the writing on Substack is usually a very separate process for me. But sometimes I will be writing a line that I think sounds cool, and I'm like, "Is this a line of dialogue in something? Is this a line in a poem? Is this line in a song?" And I'll try to fit it into different places and realize it doesn't actually work in that media, but I can shift it.

Do you feel a sense of social responsibility knowing that you have multiple platforms and mediums to voice your opinions? What does mixing creativity and an online presence and activism look like for you?

I do think it's a pretty big waste if artists who have big platforms don't use them to talk about things aside from just art. I've always been pretty politically engaged. When I was 15 or 16, I started to notice some inconsistencies with the American propaganda machine. There's a problem now where people expect everyone with a platform to talk about every single issue, which is not only unproductive but can be counterproductive. If people are talking about issues they know nothing about and spreading misinformation, that's such a mess. There are experts on these issues that we need to be listening to before we need to listen to random influencers or celebrities. But there are topics that I've researched a lot and that are very close to my heart, and those are topics I'm always going to speak out about.

Now that I have chronic illnesses, access to clean air and healthcare are things that are really, really important to me. And I'm always going to talk about issues related to reproductive rights, and I'm always going to talk about criminal justice. I do think it would be a shame for me to retreat from that as my platform grows, and I also know that perhaps one of the most powerful things that I can do is to make art that is related to that. Writing songs about those things is part of my job description as well. I don't want to be posting into the void. I feel like writing music about these things can sometimes get under people's skin and reach people in a way that just soapboxing does not.

You posted recently, saying that if you're feeling blocked creatively, you should consume art that inspired you as a child. Does nostalgia play a big part in your creative process?

None of my music would be here if not for nostalgia. I feel like the reason why people experience creative blockages or dissatisfaction with their art is because they become disconnected from the reason why they're doing it in the first place. And the reason why everyone's doing it in the first place is because you were moved by something when you were too small to even understand why you were feeling moved. Your little body was so overwhelmed with feeling, and you couldn't put into words what was happening to you, and you're like, "I want to feel like this all the time," or, "I want to make other people feel like this." For me, it just kind of strips away all the other layers of seeking validation or trying to tell certain kinds of stories or trying to hit certain milestones or reach a certain amount of people. The reason I do this is because music, at an anatomic level, relaxes me. It makes me happy. It makes me feel present, and it silences all the noise. If you're a

screenwriter, watch the first movie that made you want to write a movie. If you are a songwriter, listen to the album that made you want to be a songwriter. If you're drawing or painting, go to a museum or look online at the images that first struck you. I feel like it's some kind of classical conditioning. You regress back to the age that you were, even only for a moment. Feeling that reset button is really powerful.

The music industry is absolutely a machine that feeds on itself. Is there anything else that keeps your feet on the ground?

When I get to be on stage and look out in the crowd, it's impossible to not be present. There have been some opening slots where I can't remain focused the entire time. My brain's kind of racing a little bit, whereas with the headline shows, that basically never happens, and the energy that I'm getting from the crowd is so profound. Also, engaging with other forms of media. When I encounter a truly excellent book or piece of music, that's the best feeling in the world. People like to say pop music is a guilty pleasure, but pop music is really good.

Pop music is good. And it's incredibly hard to execute well.

Ultimately that's why I love writing for other people. I love the challenge. It's very mathematical in a way that writing sad music, writing folk, writing sad country, whatever genre, is not mathematical. It's much more in a flow. I'm very focused on syllables and making sure the number of syllables feels right in the mouth. With pop music, you can't be singing out of time. You have to be so serious. Pop music is so deep.

What have been the greatest lessons you've learned from working with other creative people? Does inspiration look different when you work solo versus when you're collaborating?

When I'm writing by myself, I move super quickly. I'm just kind of a whirling dervish of writing. I reach for a lot of the same chords, and I'm more likely to write about stuff that's more painful and more vulnerable, because there's no judgment in the room. My writing of pop music is what happens when I'm writing with other people. When I go into a session, I start with drums. Like, let's make a banger, because I can't do that alone.

One of the biggest things that I've taken away from all of my collaborative experiences is that there are so many limitations on what anyone can do alone. I think in the last few years, there has been this pressure [around] people being self-proclaimed auteurs. Like, "I wrote every song and I produced it, and I played all the instruments, and I mixed and mastered it." And why did you do that? You shouldn't do that. Why didn't you ask someone for help? I know that people do it to prove a point. I know people do it to save money. But I think that the biggest thing that I've learned in the last few years is really honing in on my strengths and weaknesses and figuring out what I can do well alone and what I need other people to help me do. I think the mark of an extremely intelligent person and a really creative force is someone who knows that they don't know anything. Anyone who thinks they can do everything alone is at the beginning of their journey. If you collaborate, you're going to make something totally unexpected that's going to surprise even you. On my next album, there's certain songs that I literally wrote the day that I met the person. I entered the room, and it just pulled something out of me that wouldn't have come out if I had been writing by myself. I think that's so powerful, and I think that's one of the most important things young singer-songwriters need to be aware of. There's actually no shame whatsoever.

What energies are we bringing into the new year, and what are we leaving behind?

We're leaving behind excessive nostalgia. All of us need to stop reminiscing. The past is behind us, and what's coming for us is better than what has left us. And we're bringing in focus. We're not going to be distracted by propaganda. We're not going to be distracted by self-comparison. We're not going to be distracted by tedious drama. We are focused on our goals. We're focused on our relationships. We're focused on ourselves. We're focused on fighting back against an oppressive regime and cutting out background noise. And absolutely no more discourse about things that don't matter. No more getting into fights with people on the internet. No more getting into fights with your friends about stuff that's not important. Just no more dumb stuff.

Jensen McRae recommends:

homemade pumpkin seed pesto

refy lip blush (in shade “canyon”)

bibliothèque by byredo

toontown rewritten

having a crush but being normal about it

Name
Jensen McRae

Vocation
singer, songwriter, poet