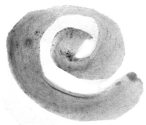
On finding your voice and accepting it will change



Musician Kacy Lee Anderson discusses learning from your younger self, taking inspiration from tradition, and facing the fear of a new venture.

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As told to Lauren Speer, 2720 words.

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"Forty-Ninth Parallel" is one of my favorite songs. I was immediately struck by the humor in the opening lines: "Should have married for money, like any woman in their right mind would do. Instead, I settled for love, and don't you know that's the worst thing you can do?" I know you're not married, so I'm curious—where do these story songs and characters come from? And specifically, can you tell me about this song?

I guess the song is about me. When I was young, I dated a bartender in Regina for a very long time, and my family ranch is on the US border, the 49th parallel. I'm having trouble explaining because it's such a bully song. Hopefully, the people involved won't read this.

Is it possible to hide parts of your real life in a story? That's what it sounds like you're doing—reshaping the narrative to avoid hurting someone.

Yeah, exactly. I don't want my ex-boyfriend's family to think that I'm classist against them because they're a good family. A friend of mine married a millionaire and got a bunch of vehicles and a house bought for her, which was insanely fascinating to watch. As a woman, you can just marry into a rich family and have a completely different experience than someone who's just like, "Oh, I like this guy because he's nice." For so long, women were marrying for money and status, and that was the goal. It's a common tale, weirdly.

I'm not a rancher, and I'm not with a cowboy. I'm with a musician—an artist, engineer, and producer—and while I live on a ranch, I'm not actually ranching. I could inherit it and take that on someday, which feels like the next chapter of the song.

Do you find yourself returning to the same world you've created in your writing?

Yeah, I do. That's why I need to take breaks from writing—so I can move into a new chapter. I tend to get kind of obsessive about certain topics, and then all my songs start living in that same realm.

That's so interesting—that it's all based on your real life. "Strange Country" is another song where I hear you singing about the tax man, gold, the lawman… and it just places me in another time entirely. Do you think it's ever possible to fully separate your personal history from what you're writing about?

I started writing based on altering traditional songs from the British Isles and Appalachian songs, which all come from that same place. That song was written largely by Clayton, and it's about a tour he went on in Europe with another band, and they had a small run-in with the law. He was like 19 or something, and he was very affected.

There are nods to traditional songs all over that recording. Like, "smell the new mown hay"—is taken from the Louvin Brothers song "Satan is Real." We live in the country where you smell the new mown hay, that's being home. Because of how we grew up, we relate to a lot of the visuals of traditional music firsthand.

Do you think that you would have found folk music no matter where you grew up?

I think that the music I make has always been very ancestral in feeling and has always felt very connected to where I was born. My ancestors have been prairie people and pioneers for many generations, so the imagery is right there.

I was reading an interview you and Clayton did where someone asked how you avoid appropriating traditional music. Clayton joked, "By not dressing like a pioneer," and you said, "By not doing press photos where we're churning butter"—which really got me. In your second album, *The Day Is Past and Gone*, which blends traditional and original songs, it's sometimes hard to tell which is which. How do you strike a balance between honoring a traditional sound while staying grounded in the present?

Wow, we're remaining modern! What a compliment. We were playing strictly traditional songs for so long that eventually we thought, "How hard can it be to write one ourselves?" That's how the song "Wood View" ended up on the record—it's about our family cemetery. Clayton's grandparents are there, our great-grandparents are there, and I'll probably be buried there. I think it sounds traditional because that kind of music was our biggest influence. We never really had a broader music community—honestly, I still don't have one locally—so it makes for like a real bubble for everything, and you can kind of live in your own reality.

Both Clayton and I were best friends with our grandpas. Clayton's grandpa bought him his steel guitar, and like my grandpa, gave us guitars to play. Our fan base was elderly people who enjoyed a traditional waltz. We weren't teens trying to pave our own path, we were cut from the same old cloth.

I read somewhere that you used to listen to a cassette Clayton's grandfather made, filled with Carter Family and Doc Watson songs—is that true?

Yeah, he was a huge music lover and listener. The internet actually played a big role in our musical education—when you have a niche interest in traditional music in the information age, YouTube was the place to go to look this stuff up. My parents had records, but they didn't listen to them. We listened to like Shania Twain and John Fogerty, and Merle Haggard. I think it all just comes back to history, wanting to know where this music came from. I guess it just really comes down to being like a nerd with a special interest.

I hear so much of Sandy Denny, Anne Briggs and other British folkies in your voice, whom you have referenced as inspirations. How did your relationship with your voice evolve as you started listening more deeply to these artists and figuring out your own musical taste?

Clayton discovered Fairport Convention's *Liege & Lief* in high school, and I was probably in grade seven. I was completely blown away by Sandy's power, especially at that time, since I had just stopped singing classical music. I'd always loved Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, and other classic country singers, but I felt there was this other side to my voice that leaned more traditional—using head voice, phrasing words differently, not having a country accent, even though I live in a place where most people do. I remember thinking, "I wish I had a British accent—everything would sound so much better."

Our friend Ryan Boldt from The Deep Dark Woods loaded up our iPods—this was probably when I was in grade eight—with every Fairport record and all those classics. I spent months riding the bus, listening to them on repeat, studying the music and envisioning myself doing it. Learning the song "The Blacksmith" by Steeleye Span was a big breakthrough for me—it was the first time I figured out how to smoothly switch between my chest voice and head voice. That song, along with Sandy's singing, really taught me volume control.

Her control sounds so effortless, especially with the lilting quality; there are so many notes happening all at once.

I know, it's incredible. She had such an angelic voice, even though we know from the stories that she was constantly sabotaging it. She had a hardcore drinking problem and was often losing her voice on stage.

One quick, fun story: she once played a Fairport show in the UK and lost her voice mid-set, so she walked off stage. Oliver Gray, a promoter and writer from Winshester, told me that he left the show and went out back where she was lighting a cigarette and said, "Do you think that's good for your voice?" She answered "Fuck off, you pathetic little creep." I thought that was amazing.

Do you feel like you do things to protect your voice?

It's a growing concern. I protect my voice by avoiding the merch table and never going out after shows if I can help it. Speaking is the worst thing for your voice, especially yelling in a bar; that kind of thing will toast you.

I do think my voice has changed. Back then, I was still a kid—I had a very clear, higher voice. It's dropped a bit since, but not so much that I need to sing old songs in lower keys or anything. So it's not a huge shift, but it is different. I always knew things would change as I got older—that's what happens when you grow up.

Now I feel a lot more powerful. I feel better about performing, and I think I sing out a lot more because I'm not shy about it. When you're young, there's a lot of insecurity, but I don't feel that way at all now. If you wanted to sound like Natalie Maines singing along with the Dixie Chicks, you have to belt. Now that I can sing along with Natalie, I've reached a new chapter in my life.

It's so rewarding growing up and getting to know your voice more.

It's definitely nice now, but I think I used to be kind of cocky in a weird way—like I always assumed I just sounded good whenever I sang. I had no real idea what quality actually meant. Most of the records we've made have been during winter, and I'm pretty sure we were sick every time. The last record we did at The Loft was with Jeff Tweedy, and we were quite sick—like I was basically on vocal rest. We'd been on tour for a few weeks, and we recorded mostly live in just three days. Honestly, I kind of hate it because you can tell I'm really pushing to get the pitch.

I sure can't tell! It's funny you notice that when you listen back. I think things like the location, the time of year, and how you're feeling all show up in a recording in ways people don't always realize.

That's the exciting part of it all—the magic and the little things that change the energy. The *Waverley Pickers* album was recorded in July, the best time of year in so many places. But in Saskatchewan, it's so green, there are thunderstorms, and there's this calm. Your body can relax because you're not shivering or trying to heat up. You're just physically relaxed, and that really affects how you sing and play.

Another thing I've realized is that when you're young, you hopefully haven't experienced a lot of trauma yet. Your shoulders aren't tight because you're not afraid, and you're just looking at the world thinking, "What can I do?" I've noticed how my body is the most important part of singing. You need to get so much air, you have to fill up your whole body cavity if you want to get power. If you're tense, it's like okay, all I have is my throat, and I hope it works.

I had a singing teacher whose whole approach was centered around that—regulating your nervous system and creating the best possible conditions for air to move freely through your body. It wasn't about technique in the traditional sense, but more about how much we carry in our bodies and how that impacts our voice. And she was right—you do hold so much tension without even realizing it.

Stretching my neck is something I only recently started doing. I was working with a therapist, and part of that involved chanting in this deep, guttural tone. At one point, she asked me, “In this moment, what do you love to do?” And I said, “I love singing. I usually feel really good when I sing.” She wanted to unpack that more, but I didn’t totally know how, because I’ve always sung. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been performing in some way.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but I’m actually kind of shy. I’m not super outgoing or a show-boater—but if someone said, “Sing a song,” I’d do it. And there’s something about that moment—having to hold space, breathe, take up air—that just feels good in your body.

As I’ve gotten older, though, I’ve realized how physical singing really is. You start to feel sore, you get tense. Some people even start jogging before going on tour just to improve their lung capacity. And meanwhile I’m standing in one spot thinking, “This is so physical—why does my guitar hurt my shoulder?”

For those who don’t know, most of your catalogue has been a collaboration with your second cousin Clayton. Can you tell me about your newer project, *The Waverley Pickers*?

Yeah, we put out a single—it’s on this album—last summer. But we actually made the record five years ago. I was really scared to release it because I feel like it shows a lot of attitude that people weren’t familiar with in my usual music. I think it took me a long time to feel confident in exposing the extreme feminist ideology that I do have. I’m not just that pleasant in reality. Well, maybe I am, I feel like I’m not going around cranking it up.

Did it feel liberating to be able to lean into that?

Yeah, it came together naturally because we all shared such a similar sentiment, and we wrote a lot of the songs together. It was fun—it ended up feeling like a concept record without us really planning it that way. It wasn’t a conscious decision to form a girl band or make overtly political music—that was just our collective attitude.

Because we weren’t able to go protest on the streets in the States (I’m honestly too scared to even go there), something had to be done. I felt like a lot of these songs were really relevant to the moment, maybe even more so now than when we first recorded them. I just wanted to put something out that might resonate with others, especially those who feel out of step with what’s going on, from the rollback of women’s rights to the sudden disregard for environmental protections that were finally starting to take shape.

I still feel like music is one of the best ways, especially within the folk tradition, to express protest and reflect how people really feel about what’s going on. As far as your pivot goes, I have to disagree with you a little—I feel like I *have* seen that side of you in your other songs. Maybe not as directly, but throughout your writing, all these female characters are subtly pushing back against their male counterparts.

Yeah, that’s true. Clayton and I have always been fascinated by the experience of women. One of our early songs, “Springtime of the Year,” sounds happy on the surface, but it’s actually about our moms being lured out to the middle of nowhere and becoming ranchers’ wives. We knew that—like, our moms came from different places and ended up marrying into this big, strange family, essentially giving up everything to take on that role.

“If You Ask How I’m Keeping” is also on that album, and it’s really about the tragedy of being a disregarded stay-at-home mom. It’s kind of funny—I was just thinking the other day how little music there is from a woman’s perspective, even in the modern history of music. I feel lucky to have the opportunity to use my voice to tell those stories, because it’s not an oversaturated subject.

I think that’s probably why I connect with your songs so much—you’re so good at writing stories and characters that feel real, especially people who don’t usually get much airtime.

Aww, well, I really do love stories. If there’s no story, I just can’t do it. All my songs have a plot—I just

need a narrative to try and pull off.

Kacy Lee Anderson recommends:

This bread recipe

Custer Died for Your Sins by Floyd Red Crow Westerman

Visit the East Block of Grasslands National Park

Beyerdynamic M500 Hypercardioid Ribbon Microphone

The Harder I Fight the More I Love You: A Memoir by Neko Case

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Vocation
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