On compassion as part of a creative practice

Musician Leyla McCalla discusses mothering while touring, the impossibility of working in a vacuum, and connecting ancestral dots through art.

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As told to Sonya Bilocerkowycz, 2596 words.

Tags: Music, Identity, Process, Time management, Mental health.

Your music is really engaged with history, archives, the past. Do you think about your ancestors while you're creating?

I think about them constantly. That's been very consistent for me. It's interesting because it's gone through phases. There were the phases of [learning] what these people actually lived through and who they were. And then it has become more of a spiritual practice for me, of honoring my ancestors and creating altars and putting their photos in frames and lighting candles and asking them for guidance or support. And also my recognition that I will be an ancestor, and what do I want to be alchemizing in my lifetime to make it easier for my kids, and for their kids, and for their kids? So I definitely think about being the link in the chain, and that's part of my motivation for making music, or writing, or making art. It's a part of my ethos, it's a big part of how I live my life.

Can you say more about how that ethos impacts the content or the technical forms of your music?

Well, I think it comes from a burning curiosity for why I am here. How did I end up in this body? How did I end up in this particular place or these particular moments in my life? And my first record, I was just trying to figure out if I was a composer, if I was a singer. I figured out that I was a composer and a singer, but I figured it out with the words of Langston Hughes. That's a book that was gifted to me by my father when I was 16 years old. I loved that book so much. And I kept on digging into the words and the poetry. And so when I went to actually start writing music, I didn't exactly know what I wanted to say, but I knew that Langston Hughes knew what he wanted to say, and that those were pretty unimpeachable, poetic phrases.

And so that was an arrival of some sort. Yeah, I'm going to be this musician. I'm going to be this person that starts writing songs. But by then I had moved to Louisiana and I was learning a lot about the impact of the Haitian Revolution on Louisiana history and culture. And I was like, why does nobody talk about Haiti? It's such a glaringly large topic that just gets intentionally whitewashed, or disappeared, or really not honored and not incorporated into any sort of narrative. I mean, New Orleans makes most of its money on jazz and Creole food, but what does that mean? Where does that come from? And so that made me very curious about how I even ended up in New Orleans, because I didn't really know those things about New Orleans going into it. And now it's all I know about New Orleans.

I've become a big advocate for Haitian culture and recognition of Haitian culture within Louisiana culture. So my second record was all these songs about migration and all these Cajun fiddle tunes and Haitian songs and finding compatibility between them content-wise. And then my third record, *Capitalist Blues*, was digging more into capitalism. And then I did the crazy commission project—the wild, most ambitious project of my life—*Breaking the*

Thermometer, which became a theatrical performance and then a record. And I worked on that for years, a lot of research and collaboration. It was creative expansion on steroids for me. That connected me deeply with my ancestry and with my Haitianness, and mostly because I went into the archives and I was like, I can't understand anything they're saying. I'm disconnected from this even though I identify so much with this struggle.

So there was a lot of education about Kreyòl language and support that I needed to be able to interpret what was happening. My dad helped me. The archivist Laura Wagner helped me. And just colloquially, musically, I was working with a master Haitian drummer, and I would play something I was working on, and he would be like, "Oh, that's *that* rhythm." And that's how I started to map out this ancestral, rhythmic world that is still pretty new to me. His mentee and spiritual son, Shawn [Myers], plays in my band and was a big part of being able to bring those sounds into a 21st-century sonic space.

So after *Breaking the Thermometer*, it was like, Wait a minute–who am I? What do I want to do? What do I want to say? What am I about? What is this moment of my life about? And so I feel like in some ways it's been all ancestral study, and I'm starting to look within myself for some of those answers. I needed to do all these other things and connect all these other dots in order to get to the heart of what I'm getting to the heart of now, which is who I am, who I want to be, how I want to make music, and how I want to live.

It's really up to me to alchemize the freedom that I want to have. And music is where I get to do that the most. That's where I tune into something that is so inside of myself, and so beyond myself at the same time. And I can't help but feel that that's an ancestral connection, an ancestral tie.

You're a multilingual singer in English, French, and Haitian Kreyòl. What emotional shifts do you feel when you're switching between those languages?

I've found a lot of strength in learning Haitian Kreyòl songs. It connects me to this part of myself that I haven't been able to fully know. Because I'm diaspora—my parents immigrated in the 60's during the Duvalier Regime—I've been to Haiti many times in my life, but the political situation makes it really complicated for me to envision traveling there safely. I don't have any close family still there, so I'd be relying on friends or just need a lot of money, and there's a lot of instability.

So I looked to these old recordings for connection, and I continue to find so many beautiful songs that I'm like, "Oh my God, this one exists? Oh my God, that one exists?!" It's just amazing to me. It's this deep, deep, well that feels so untapped. I've made all these records and done all this research, but I still feel like I'm just scratching the surface because I have so much more work to do, so much more to figure out about the culture and the language.

And it does bring out a different part of my personality, my voice changes. I don't know how to describe it. My voice changes when I'm singing in Kreyòl, and I don't even know who it is sometimes that's singing. It's like this other personality that's emerging.

English feels like where I can be most poetic and honest in a certain way. Kreyòl is strength and connected to this thing that's bigger, and English is the language I think in. That's the language I'm interfacing with the world in. It's the language I'm speaking to my children the most.

So it's interesting to just get those sounds in my tongue. To me, it's like tools—they're all tools, and they all bring out different emotional spaces and personalities that I'm trying to access through these songs.

I'm wondering how you face feelings of futility, like when you're looking at mass atrocity, or thinking about the current situation in Haiti. How do you make art while all this other madness is happening?

I don't know what the final destination is, but I'm committed to the path. And when we get too fixated on a particular point of arrival as a marker of justice, that can be problematic. I think that's the crux of it: we always have to be working towards the changes we want to see, even if we know that we're not going to see those

changes. And it’s a heartbreaking process, but I mean, that’s life.

Also, my parents are both people who really instilled that in me because they have been working for Haitian human rights for my entire life. There are quantifiable markers of progress, but I think especially as an artist, the quality of what you are contributing is what’s most important. It’s hard. It’s hard to release control, but it’s also impossible to be in control. So I find myself in those moments where I feel overcome, overwhelmed. Like yesterday, sleeping in the bed with my son, just like, “How did we get so lucky and privileged to not have to face what children in Rafah just faced?” And I was thinking about the burn victims and the lack of hospitals and lack of aid and lack of resources. And all I can say is, “I have to keep talking about this. I can’t be silent.”

It’s hard to be such a cracked open heart, but I also don’t know how to be any other way. It’s part of accepting that this is how I want to live my life, and what I do with my voice actually does matter.

That reminds me of your cover of Barbara Dane’s ‘Freedom is a Constant Struggle.” This notion that we just keep going, day after day.

It’s a constant dying. It’s a constant moaning, constant crying– all those words. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I always wanted to sing that song, I love that version with the Chambers Brothers.

Thinking about parenthood and legacy, you’re a mother of three. How do you balance the demands of motherhood with recording, touring, etc.?

First of all, I can’t do anything in a vacuum. It isn’t just me making all this stuff happen. I’ve created a lot of systems of accountability in my life, for pushing things through to the finish line. I have managers who are strategizing with me all the time, how all the pieces need to be in place for me to have the space to think. My mother is super helpful and involved. My mother moved from Haiti a couple of years ago back to New Orleans, and she helps me a lot when I’m on the road. Their father is involved. Everyone is just figuring out how to hold this thing.

I also think about what I want my kids to gather from my work, and I continue working towards that and continue asking for support. The hardest part has been to learn what I actually need, because I felt like I’m asking for too much a lot of the time, and then I’m like, “No, actually that’s just a need. That’s just what we need.” And I do a lot of journaling and writing and list-making to structure those ideas because parenting is overwhelming. It can be very overwhelming, but it’s like, “Okay, what’s a problem that needs to be solved today? What’s a problem that needs a long-term strategy? What’s the deadline for this form that needs to be filled out? How much is it going to cost?”

It’s a lot to balance. I have a therapist. I hire nannies too. I have friends who step in– one of my friends is with my kids right now, while I’m here [on the road]. There’s a lot of moving parts, and the system is not perfect. And then one thing falls off and then it’s like, “Okay, we got to upgrade, system upgrade! That nanny didn’t work out. Gotta find a new nanny. It’s going to be more awesome. Nothing’s going to stop us from living a good life. We’re going to continue to move forward.”

But also my managers have been super helpful because I’m navigating, “What offers can I take that will actually bring my business profit?” It’s not just the creative side, it’s also like, “Okay, we can’t actually do that show because it’s going to end up costing too much money and take me away from my kids.” So in a way, my kids have been a very defining line for me about what is going to work and what’s not going to work. That relationship is not going to work because this is not good for my kids. And so they’re a good barometer for how things need to function.

How do your children influence your art itself? Obviously the structures around your art you just described, but what about the content and the form of your art?

I feel like I got to dig into that pretty significantly on this last record because I was doing a lot of

reflecting on the mother that I want to be to them. What do I want them to remember about me? I just feel the precariousness of life all the time. I lost my brother a couple of years ago, and it's just like, wow, things can really change quickly. So do I want them to be consumed with anxiety and fear that they're not exactly who I want them to be at any particular moment, or do I want to dig in and really try to understand who they are, and figure out what they need to become who they want to be?

That song "Scaled to Survive" was inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Undrowned*. I was reading this chapter—I think it was called "Breathe"—and it's about teaching your young to swim and how the mom pushes them into the water, and then they're like, "Okay, I can do it." I was thinking about giving birth and how intense of an experience that was for me. For anybody who's ever given birth, it's the pinnacle. And I remember feeling, "This could be big. I don't know what life is looking like on the other side."

And I was thinking about how we learn to breathe from feeling like we're drowning, the medicine is in the pain. And I was like, "Well, my mom gave birth to me, so she must have had these same feelings and thoughts." And again, that link in the chain concept just comes back to me all the time. I'm learning to have a lot more compassion for my children, myself, and my mother, and that's coming into my creative practice. It's seeping in. Sometimes it's very loud and obvious, and other times it's just, "This still feels like it's about trying to figure out how to protect myself and my kids."

In 50 or 70 years from now, what is something you hope your kids will feel while listening to your music?

I hope they will have good memories of their childhood. I hope they're going to be like, "Wow, mom was doing all this stuff, while she was also baking bread and making us pizzas and popsicles and organizing our play dates and trying to bring us along sometimes." I hope they'll be like, "She really created a lot of joy for us."

Leya McCalla Recommends:

Masters of the Dew by Jacques Roumain (novel)

Louisiana Hot Sauce, Creole Style by Canray Fontenot (album)

Thao (artist)

Senegal: Modern Senegalese Recipes from the Source to the Bowl by Pierre Thiam with Jennifer Sit (cookbook)

Mosquito Supper Club in New Orleans (restaurant)

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