On trusting your process



Songwriter and author Rosanne Cash on confronting complicated subject matter, how all writing practices inform each other, and not letting your best ideas get away from you.

December 17, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2407 words.

Tags: Music, Writing, Process, Inspiration, Creative anxiety, Focus.

I read a quote from you where you mentioned that you are writing songs now that you couldn't have written 10 years ago. Why do you think that is? Is it just about being at the right place in your life now, or having a more developed skill set?

I think it's all of the above. Also I had kind of chipped away at things in order to be able to access something that I hadn't been able to access before. I really have that image of just drilling through walls to get to something else. Also, I think my freedom with language got better and my concern for people pleasing really fell away. My rhyme scheme wizard stayed intact, but I just don't want freedom of language, I also wanted the freedom to get at difficult subjects.

It's funny to hear you mention people pleasing. To my mind, you've always seemed like the kind of artist who has done whatever they wanted and people either liked it or they didn't. I guess every artist deals with some version of this, not wanting to alienate people by talking about certain things.

The people pleasing part is not so much about the writing as it is about the concepts. I think what I mean is that because my last record, *The River & the Thread*, was really successful, and a lot of people around me—people who advise me and work with me—expected me to repeat that formula somehow. Like, "Oh, you really should do another concept record, or you should do another themed record!" Audiences and performing art centers had really liked that record, but I just found myself resisting it with everything I had. I just couldn't do it. I was desperate to write the next 12 songs that would be meaningful to me. I wanted to get back to really excruciatingly personal song writing.

Your new record is called *She Remembers Everything*. The subject matter addresses issues around trauma and memory, but it also speaks acutely to the experience of what it means to be a woman in 2018.

That's so funny, because some of these songs were written even before the 2016 election. I guess in some ways it was a postcard from the future.

Knowing that so many of these topics are really percolating in the cultural psyche right now, how does that influence the experience of playing these songs live or taking them on the road?

Well, It does add a layer of resonance, and I like it. I feel a sense of community that's really powerful. I did this thing at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn where I collaborated with four other women who were doing readings of literature and poetry, and interspersing them with the songs on the record. It was really powerful. I just felt like something burst open and it was great. I cried afterwards. This record marks a funny moment for me. It wasn't that I was afraid to confront these things, it was just that I didn't know how. They were the next thing in line. It's not that I avoided them, it's just that you round a corner and suddenly this is what is waiting for you. This is what was behind the next rock.

You've been writing and recording songs for a long time, but you are also a very accomplished writer. Having published five books now, do you feel like these two processes—writing books and writing songs—have informed each other in interesting ways?

Yes, though I find it curious when people say, "I know you're a songwriter, but you're also a writer!" You know, songwriting is writing. They aren't *that* different. The prose and songs definitely have conversations. On my record *10 Song Demo*, I wrote this song called "Bells & Roses" and then I wrote this short story where bells and roses appear in it, and for some reason I had to really work that out of my system. That has happened in other ways, too, like in my memoir where subjects and songs just kept reappearing. Often I had to clear out the obsession with the image or a certain theme until I could move on.

As a songwriter, are there certain tendencies that you have to fight against? Bad habits that you have to try and keep in check?

The bad songwriting habits would probably include too much navel gazing. I'm always checking myself to avoid melting into an emotional puddle where it's too much about the feeling and you lose the discipline for the craft of songwriting. That's not so much a problem for me anymore, but it definitely was when I was younger, in that way that young people think they're feeling something that's never been felt before. You know? And none of us have original feelings. Another thing is I have to be careful about the way I use minor chords, but that is something connected to my limits as a technical musician. Just yesterday someone said to me, "Man, you really love that one-to-six minor chord change." I really do love it, but I try to break away from it because I do that too much.

Do you find that your process for making songs has changed much over the years?

I'm more willing to trust whatever that process is now. I had to learn that it's OK not knowing in the beginning exactly what you are writing. In the past I would get frustrated and feel like I was beating on a door that wouldn't open, but now I'm more like, "Well, let's see where this goes." It may take weeks before I understand what a piece is trying to be. For example, I've been writing the lyrics to a musical for the last four years, as well as writing the songs for this new record, which is why it took five years to get the record done.

With the musical I've been working on, there came a point where we thought we were finished with all the songs, but then a few weeks ago it started to feel like there was still a song missing. It needed one more song. So I start thinking about it, and I've got nothing—just nothing. Eventually the first concept comes to me about what the song could be about, but I still only have one line. Then at 4am this morning I woke up and I got the second line, and suddenly I kind of knew where the song was going to go. I thought, "Dammit, I've got to get up, or I'll fall back asleep and lose it." So I got up and came downstairs and got that second line down and then the next verse… and now I'm exhausted.

It is so satisfying when you force yourself to get up and get it down. There is nothing worse than knowing there's this thing—this great idea—and it tried to visit you and you ignored it and now it's gone.

That is a great way to put it. I'll then even go the next step and think, "Well, I wonder who got that idea?"

Tori Amos says that about songwriting. If the muse visits you and you ignore her, she's like, "OK, fuck you then," and she takes that idea to someone else.

I've always felt like that. I used to deeply regret the things I lost and knew I had lost, but now I try to have more of a philosophical attitude about it. I get the things I can get, and I am always open to the idea that if I miss something, then eventually something else will come to me. And maybe somebody else needed that other song.

You're working on a musical project about Norma Rae. I know a lot of songwriters who have wrestled with the musical format and what it means to write songs in a voice other than your own, or for a specific narrative purpose. It can be a really fascinating exercise for a songwriter.

It is challenging. It's set in a different time, in 1973, and it's a very different kind of woman speaking in the songs, and I can't condescend her. She doesn't have my language and she doesn't have my experiences, but that doesn't mean she doesn't have her own sense of poetry and her own wisdom. So respecting her and trying not to inject myself into her was

challenging, but it was also really beautiful getting to know her and how she would speak. The hardest part was sometimes finding the male voices, particularly the older men in the piece. It was hard and it was also a little sad. I realized that back in 1973 in a mill town a man had to give up a lot of dreams, and most of them didn't ever talk about that and it was sad to me. It was not only a really interesting exercise as a songwriter, but it also gave me a lot of compassion.

In 2010 you published a memoir. I know the process of writing that kind of book can be painful, but also illuminating. How was that experience for you?

It was both. I think if you really make a commitment to go deep and tell the truth, that it is painful and it is equally illuminating.I feel like some things I finally put to rest and I was surprised to see how patterns repeated themselves in my life. I realized that I didn't often experience my life in a chronological way, and so I didn't write about it in a chronological way—its circular, things keep coming back. Also, I thought I had finished with that kind of writing, and then just about six months ago I wrote a couple thousand words about my mom and I went, "Oh dammit." Same thing with the line that came at 4 o'clock this morning, it's not like I *want* to do some of this work… but maybe I just need to.

Often there's also that feeling that if there's something compelling you to do it, there must be some kernel of truth there that needs to be explored. Still, it's often when you're trying your hardest to steer away from something that it most loudly presents itself.

That is so true. I often think about what Martha Graham said, which was that it doesn't matter what *you* think of your own work, and it doesn't matter what other people think of it. You have to do it, or else the world won't have it… and then we're all less for it. You just have to do your work, whatever that is.

Do you have a dedicated day-to-day creative practice? Are you disciplined about the way that you write or work on music?

It's interesting because John, my husband and collaborator, and I have completely different practices. He goes into the studio every day, and some days are really frustrating and some days he writes something really great. I don't do that really. I take notes, sometimes I sit down and write and write and write, particularly about doing the songs for the musical. Some days it is just free-floating stuff, and I don't complete anything, but I've got things brewing. I try not to dictate too much what it is.

Do you abandon projects? Or are you someone who works on something until it finally does what you want it to do?

I don't abandon things, meaning that sometimes I can't complete it, but I still have the notes for it or the lines for it and I go back to it sometimes years later~~*years*~~. So I don't abandon very much, no. In the same way patterns repeat themselves, sometimes lines take a long time to make sense or find their place. I wrote a song called "Rules of Travel" and I wrote the chorus probably a decade before I wrote the other verses.

Do you have advice for young musicians?

I teach sometimes at NYU, maybe twice a year. I don't give advice so much, but I'll listen to their songs and point out where they dropped their rhyme scheme or ask them things like, "Were you conscious that you made this choice? Was that a placeholder word? Can you turn that line over a bit more? Are you writing in themes rather than specifics? Because nobody gives a shit about themes." You know, that kind of thing.

As far as advice in the music business, I swear I don't even know anymore. It's so, so hard for young musicians. You know, I have young musicians in my family and they work so hard and it is nearly impossible to sell records. So what are you going to do, make your living from touring? But what if you have a family? What if you are ill? It's really hard. That's why I work in artist advocacy. I testified before Congress, and getting the copyright laws changed is crucial and dealing with streaming services in a way that artist might be fairly paid.

Do you get a sense those things will change?

Well, they have to. I have to believe they will, because so many of these laws were written not just pre-internet but before World War II. They don't make sense anymore. You are dealing with these antique laws with no reciprocal agreements so, in a variety of different situations, the artists simply don't get paid. It's kind of insane.

Thanks to the internet, the music business now atomizes at such a fast rate that by the time anyone realized they needed to have a handle on it, it's too late.

Yeah, the horse already left the barn. It's just my hope that we can try and fix a few things… and that young artists know the reality they are entering into.

Essential Rosanne Cash:

Music:

Seven Year Ache (1981)
King's Record Shop (1987)
Interiors (1990)
The River & the Thread (2014)
She Remembers Everything (2018)

Books:

Bodies of Water (1997)
Penelope Jane: A Fairy's Tale (2006)
Songs Without Rhyme: Prose By Celebrated Songwriters (2001)
Composed: A Memoir (2010)

Name
Rosanne Cash

Vocation
Musician



