On welcoming the unexpected



Musician Shania Twain discusses re-learning to use her voice, letting go of self-doubt and self-criticism, and the importance of having fun with what you create.

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As told to Matt Mitchell, 2679 words.

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Your album, *Queen of Me*, features a number of contemporary writers, like Wayne Hector, Adam Messinger, and also Tyler Joseph of twenty one pilots. How does collaborating with musicians who don't explicitly make the same music as you elevate the compositions that you make together?

Well, I do so much writing alone. And I always have. With this album, especially because I'd written so much of it during COVID, I wasn't able to get into the studio with a group of musicians or other creative people, producers and stuff. But I was really ready at the end of all of that, to get the songs and the ideas in the room with other people, just for the sake of getting together with other people. It was really cool. It was a really great opportunity to reconnect with other talents, other producers, other songwriters. Once I started getting together with everybody, it went super fast, the creative stuff. A lot of the vocals on the album were done during those writing sessions, for example.

A big thing for you in the early days was the autonomy of writing your own songs, especially at a point in time where a lot of country artists weren't expected to. That's still the case for a lot of country acts, but you still continue to write, or co-write, every song you make. What are the expectations in popular country music for its artists when it comes to songwriting? Is it more or less encouraging now than in 1995?

I've never been in the Nashville country music songwriting groups, and I don't know what that would be like. I know that country music can be repetitive right now. I find it takes artists like Brandi Carlisle, who does write her own music and does write lyrics [that] are more unique. She uses different chord changes, things that I find interesting. You know, in the '90s, I think there was more of a variety of artists in the industry, too, because you had more of a bluegrass influence. Then there was a wider, broader range of sounds. I was getting rock, pop-country and then Alison Krauss was getting more bluegrass. And we had some really down-home country artists, like Alan Jackson. Now, I feel that we're missing some of that broader-edged country.

Last year, you played Coachella with Harry Styles in front of thousands of people and that was huge. You've been performing on and off for big crowds for 25+ years. Are there still nerves when it comes to getting onstage in front of so many, even though you've been doing it for so long?

I don't get the nerves anymore [in] the same way. I used to until just a few years ago. And it was a horrible experience, to have stage fright. Now it's more adrenaline. It's more excitement, really. I'm anxious to get out there more out of just adrenaline, really, than anything. But I used to be really afraid, going out on stage. Really, really afraid.

Finally I just turned a corner. With my voice operation, I realized no one can ever be perfect live, anyway. There's no perfect performance. There's close to perfect, Celine Dion does close to perfect. But I started realizing that that expectation on myself, especially after my throat surgery, was just not realistic. It's

either stop performing or get to a place where you enjoy it and really love it. And part of that is just letting go of all the self-criticism and the self-doubt. So, knowing that my voice and this procedure may not last forever, I'm like, "I've got to do this now." My focus changed. I gotta get out there and enjoy it while I have it.

Of course, dysphonia can really affect anybody, especially a singer. Your voice is your instrument. You've talked a lot in interviews about what that comeback was like for you, but I'm really curious about what you remember most from that period in your life when you weren't making music and you were recovering.

I was pretty depressed about not being able to sing with any control, sing with any power. Luckily, I was a new mother and I was so indulged in that. It was a great, very healthy distraction, to be focused on being a mom and taking a break from the madness of the career that had been so demanding for so many years. I took advantage of that in a very positive way. But I was depressed about the fact that I didn't know what was wrong and I didn't know how to fix it. So, those seven years of not knowing that mystery behind it scared me and I was bummed out about it. What I could do, though, was still write songs, write lyrics. I could still be creative. That was really, really helpful.

Then, it just got to the point where it was like, "You know what, I'm just not ready to give this up yet. I'm ready to turn over a few more rocks and find out what's wrong with me." I was just barking up the wrong tree, and it ended up being lyme disease-related, which was nothing that anybody had ever expected.

Was Lionel Richie asking you to duet with him in 2012 the first time you seriously considered returning to music and trying to get your voice back?

Getting to do the thing with Lionel Richie was before my operation, so I was sure I wasn't going to be able to do it. Like, "This is a bad idea. I can't. There's no way I can sing 'Endless Love' with Lionel Richie. Just forget it." Anyway, I did it. I pushed myself through the fear. I put myself in a very vulnerable situation. But, what it did was it taught me that there's enough muscle memory there and there's enough singing knowledge that I've had all these years that got me to a point where I could do it.

I could never do it on a whole album over a few weeks, or anything like that. But, I could do it in that moment. So, in order to sustain it, I had to get this operation. I was able to do a bunch of therapy that got me through a tour and my album, *Now*, but with great difficulty and a lot of exhaustion. But, yes, the Lionel Richie moment was the moment that I realized, "Well, it's still there. I just have to find out how to hold onto it and maintain it." The challenge was still ahead of me, but, at least I was convinced that it was still there.

I think your voice has changed since the operation, but the command of it is stronger than ever. I'm curious about singing the old hits. Do you have to switch up your approach when you go into singing those, or is it still copacetic as ever?

No, I have to take a different approach. I've had to relearn my voice and I have to use it differently. I might do a falsetto where I didn't do one before, or I might do a full voice instead of a falsetto. That's a lot of what happens. The average listener may not even really notice it. They may just think I'm singing it differently, but not because I'm doing it for my new voice. I'm changing some keys, and that is a blessing to be able to do that. I have a stronger voice now, so I've lost some subtleties that I used to have. I sing things with more air. With the classics, I have to change the key. But it's still satisfying. And that's my boundary: If I'm not enjoying it anymore, then I'll stop doing it. And I'm having fun with it. I think I'm having fun with it out of appreciation, as well as gratitude that I still have [my voice].

It looks to me like you're having a lot of fun doing everything. And in turn, *Queen of Me* is a super joyful record. But you've always been able to spin trauma and heartache into triumph. I'm curious if that part of your songwriting always came naturally, or if you had to learn how to not lean too heavily into sorrow? Because country music tends to get a bit morose.

Yeah, it can be [*laughs*]. I do love those self-pity songs, too. I do write them, as well. I do deliberately turn a

lot of them around. So, for example, on *Queen of Me*, I wrote that album primarily during COVID. And writing is escapism for me. I'm like, "Okay, I'm gonna go escape into my songwriting and cheer myself up." Any song ideas that are taking me down the rabbit hole, I'm going to turn them around and make myself smile, laugh, dance, whatever. It was a well-being exercise, and the outcome ended up being really happy and chirpy. I just, affectionately, call it my "happy album."

Something I really love about *Queen of Me* is how far you are stepping out of your comfort zone on it, or at least how far you're stepping away from the music most people have come to associate you with. Have you always been interested in testing the limits of what a country song can become? Has that box of possibilities always been wide open?

The songwriting part of it is always just a song. It's just a guitar and a song, a melody, a story, a theme, a concept. I'm not thinking [about] genre or style or anything like that. That's just the raw singer-songwriter. Then, once I start thinking [about] production, how the song is going to be treated, then that's where that decision is made. "Where do you go from here?" And this is when you call up somebody you admire, like Tyler Joseph, and you say, "Hey, are you interested in producing a song for me? Because I love what you do with your own music." He loved "The Hardest Stone" and decided to put his own style to it, which is what I wanted him to do. I wanted him, his talents, creating the track for the song. Had I imagined the song like that when I wrote it? No. I let Tyler reimagine the song in his way. With those kinds of collaborations, you just have to have an open mind and work with people that you admire. It's not even really about deliberately making that record. It's seeing people that you think are super talented and then, you put two things together, you've got something really creative. You've got something that is atypical of the typical Shania record, yes.

Being that you're a musician who came to prominence a long time before the internet took over fully, I'm curious about your thoughts on all of that. Because some of your songs have gone viral on TikTok, especially "Man! I Feel Like a Woman." A lot of young men make videos about how much they unabashedly love that song. Do you ever pay attention to any of that, the trends and how your music keeps touching new generations?

I do think that we're going through an interesting phase with the arts in general, with fashion and photography. Music, certainly, is a big part of that. I think I've been a part of that nostalgia for kids that are in their 20s right now. They were little when "Man! I Feel Like a Woman" first came out and there's a lot of young people that have related to it from when they were a kid. Now, it just lives on. I don't know, maybe it just "relives," or something. We all do that, look back to our childhood music and how it influenced us. This generation now, though, is doing it more than I ever did.

My music keeps resurfacing, I think, because it's a cultural bend that we're going through. My own son is doing that, as well, so it's interesting to watch it. It's fun to revisit it. I hear my music covered by so many artists and it's the coolest feeling.

***Now* came out 15 years after *Up!*, and *Queen of Me* is out six years after *Now*. For both of those album releases did it feel like a comeback? Or was it more of "I've always been here and I'm letting my next creation go out into the world"?**

There were a lot of factors involved. I didn't deliberately not make records. For *Now*, there were a lot of things in the way. I didn't know what was wrong with my voice yet, so it took an exceptional amount of work, vocally, to get to the place where I could make a quality album and get out on a tour. Then, there was, finally, treating the voice at the source. That was going to put me back, a little bit, in time. And then, COVID on top of it, that's the only reason why there's a gap between *Now* and *Queen of Me*. Because, I've been writing for a long time. I just pulled [*Queen of Me*] together during COVID because I had all that time on my hands. But, now, I've got all this music accumulated. I'm getting back into the studio as soon as I can. I'm like, "I owe myself more albums. There's so much more in there."

Being that you grew up in Canada and then became a superstar in the states, how have you been welcomed elsewhere? Are people as obsessed with "Man! I Feel Like a Woman" everywhere else, too?

This is a very funny fact that surfaced not that long ago. “Man! I Feel Like a Woman” is, apparently, the most popular karaoke song in the world. But, in countries like the Philippines, karaoke is just really, really, really big. And that is how a song like that ends up becoming such a big karaoke song, because it goes all over the world. I’ve got fans all over the world in countries that I’m dying to visit and do tours [in]. I’m just very lucky to have an international career and not be limited geographically. I like the broad expansion of where my career has taken me.

Even on *Queen of Me* you’re still blazing new trails in your own sound, despite having sold more records than any other woman in country music. Whether it’s releasing 12 of the 16 songs on *Come On Over* as singles or remaking yourself with a bonafide pop record 30 years into your career, is the goal always going to be to subvert everyone’s perception of where your artistry goes next?

This is something that I do for myself. I get bored very quickly, so I love taking left turns unexpectedly. I love to do things that are unexpected when I’m writing, whether it’s a chord change or play on a word. It’s my playtime. I’m always inventing new ways to keep myself as inspired and enthusiastic about what I do. I have things that are stylistically trademark-ish about the way I write things. I do make a lot of statement lyrics. I have an exclamation way of singing things. But there’s so many styles that have influenced me over my life that I’ve still got to explore. I will never be able to cover them all in my lifetime, so there’s always someplace new to go. And I can’t wait. It’s like the way I cook: I never make the same recipe twice.

Shania Twain Recommends:

Making your own skin care emulsion and exfoliating

Embracing the small things in life we take for granted, like fresh air

Your Place or Mine, starring Reese Witherspoon and Ashton Kutcher

Riding horses

The Secret Life of the American Musical by Jack Viertel

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