

Shirley Manson on the power of melancholy



October 13, 2016 - Shirley Manson's band, Garbage, has sold over 17 million albums. Though her childhood dreams of becoming a prima ballerina were dashed due to an injury, Manson is happy with the way things have turned out: "God knows what would have happened to me if music hadn't come through—I'd continue to work in a shop probably because that was all I was fit for. I didn't have any qualifications or anything. Maybe I'd have ended up going back to school, I don't know, but thankfully I don't have to worry myself with that shit. I don't have to look back."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2186 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Identity](#), [Anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Adversity](#).

Your songs often circle the same general themes—despair, anger, and a distrust for romance. Where do you think that melancholia comes from?

I think it comes from being a hypersensitive child and for so long believing that there was something wrong with being hypersensitive, instead of realizing that it's actually a power. It's kind of a superpower really, but I didn't realize that when I was young and so I rebelled and raged against basically everything. Now that I'm older, I want to examine rather than rage, but the themes remain the same for me because you're formulated by your pain. Pain is what designs your life, so you cling on to those hotspots. They remain interesting to you forever.

Are you one of those people who needs to write sad songs in order to be a relatively happy person?

Yes. I think it's only happy people who are able to properly examine the dark. I always thought of myself as a negative person because I am drawn to whatever is happening in the shadows, and it's only now that I'm older that I realize I'm actually a relatively happy person because I have the balls to go into the dark.

Were you a surly teenager?

I was so surly. Even as a baby apparently I was very surly. As a teenager I went through a dreadful phase. To be fair, at the very beginning of my teens—when I was around 13—I was bullied pretty mercilessly at school and that did something strange to me. I became really defiant because I was so furious at having my life affected by a stranger who essentially was judging me for what she thought about me from my external behavior. It made me crazy with anger and I became defiant and I fought against everything and everyone. I didn't want anyone telling me what to do. Not ever.

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My dad has really big personality and in order to stop him in his tracks I had to learn how to be insanely defiant. I had to stop him from ruling over me intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. Also, it's worth noting that my dad was my Sunday school teacher. My family would say it was a case of the unstoppable force meeting the unmovable object. I am the unmovable object. That pretty much defines my teenage years. I was very dark and incredibly difficult.

How do you feel like that carried over into your adult life and into your creative life?

My dad was an academic and everything in his life is marked with some sort of score, literally. It shot me down a lot, that way of thinking. I often failed in school because I rebelled against being judged academically. For a long time in the band I struggled to feel like I had anything of any worth to offer the guys, who are three accomplished engineers, producers, and musicians. It took me a long time to get over that.

People that don't know you would probably not have that perception of you.

I don't think anyone thinks I have a moment of self-doubt. Of course I have tons of it, but I push through anyway. That's how I was brought up. Yeah, you can feel all you want but reality is what you do. I masked those feelings of insecurity by being aggressive and angry.

You write about romantic disaffection in such a powerful way. Where does that come from?

I really find it hard to fall in love. I just don't believe in it. I don't trust in it. Every love affair I've ever had has ended badly, aside from my current marriage. I'm also suspicious of human beings. I don't feel good about humanity. I'm a bit of a misanthrope. I've always felt very cynical about love.

And that hasn't changed at all as you've grown older?

Not really. I don't really trust human beings. I think they are inherently untrustworthy. That's why I love the beasts. You can trust the beasts. You know when they're going to bite you, you know when they're going to love on you, and there's no real surprises with animals. Human beings are very rarely what they seem.

Sometimes we should really tap into our anger instead of just thinking about it as this thing that we need to get over. In the same way, unrest and melancholy can also be a powerful creative force.

I think so. All these dark forces are powerful. At the same time, you can keep your home warm with anger but you can also burn your home down with it. It's power. I think that for me to feel safe in the world, I need to explore the shadows. It's like when you're little and you think there are monsters under your bed and then your parents go: "You need to look under the bed," "No, I don't want to look under the bed." "You need to look under the bed." So you look under the bed and there's nothing there. That premise is how I live my life. I need to constantly look under the bed and then under the carpet, open the curtains, see behind the wall because then I feel like I'm getting all the information. I don't just want the pleasant information. I want the whole fucking kit and caboodle, do you know what I mean? I think people that don't want to explore the dark are missing out on so much. Melancholia is powerful. Sadness is powerful and beautiful sometimes. As long as you don't drown in it.

Also it must be a big part of how and why you make music. If you didn't feel those things, would you still want to do this?

It's funny you should say that. I see pain in people. When I sit down with someone, I can often see their whole story. It's almost like a second sight or something. I know that other people don't necessarily have that same ability because I'll say to people "Wow, she seems so unhappy" or "He was so disturbed" and everyone will be like "What are you talking about?" and then time will pass and I will be proven right.

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There are times when I've drowned under my empathy for other people but I feel like I've become more balanced as I've gotten older. I no longer think I can fix anyone. I used to think that "Oh, I can help fix this. I can make this person feel better!" and then I realized that actually you can't make anyone feel better by doing anything. They'll have to figure it out. Sometimes I look across the audience and I see these faces that seem to be in so much pain. You can just see the unhappiness and uncertainty on people's faces sometimes. It's too much information. I guess that's what makes us artists, that's why we do what we do because we want to bridge that gap. When you soothe someone else, you're also soothing yourself.

Can you still relate to the feelings in the songs that you wrote when you were younger?

I still relate to most of them. I don't know if it was because we were actually adults when we made that first Garbage record, but I still feel mostly the same. We weren't kids, you know? I wasn't 18 years old. Those songs have very adult themes, so I still identify with it. I think artists are born through the trials that form them. It goes back to that idea that you just can't ever really get rid of the feelings that informed you when you were young. Anger in particular. If you're in touch with your anger that stays with you for the rest of your life. Your outrage and your determination to react against it—I don't think that ever disappears no matter what happens.

Shirley Manson Recommends:

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[Between The World and Me](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates

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There was that long period of time a few years ago when Garbage were not making music. What was your state of mind during that time?

Terrible. I was perpetually seething. I felt furious because I felt like I'd been dumped onto the garbage pile and younger models of what I did were coming along and being lauded for something I knew I did way better. It made me crazy. It was good for me though because it made me realize that I was really a musician. Up until that point I'd never really thought myself as such. I just thought I was like a party girl that got lucky. Then during the hiatus I realized that I needed to make music. Music is what I know, what I'm good at, and what I respond to. I need it in my life. So that long hiatus was really good for me because from then on I thought of myself as an artist and not just as an entertainer. That was an incredible realization.

Be a student, be curious, be adventurous, explore. That's what I want to do with my life when I grew up. A little angst is good. It keeps you open to things.

Sometimes I think all that self-torture is good for you. It's not entirely bad. If you get to the point where you think your shit doesn't stink, you're fucked. You're over. If you think there's nothing left to learn, you're a dullard. Be a student, be curious, be adventurous, explore. That's what I want to do with my life when I grew up. A little angst is good. It keeps you open to things.

Speaking of melancholy, who were the artists that most inspired you when you were young?

I'm still obsessed with Nick Cave. To me, he's the most important and vital rockstar still out there. The most dangerous, the most exciting, the most vigorous. I'm obsessed with him. As a young person I was into all the predictably dark things—Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Clash, and Bauhaus. I was attracted to dark sounds and I loved guitar music for whatever reason, I don't know why. There's no reason why I should be so attracted to it, but I always have been.

But the most important person was Siouxsie. I was obsessed by her. I'm still obsessed by her. She haunts every musical moment when I'm in the studio. She haunts me. I love everything about her, the way she looks, the way she sings, the way she acts—everything. Yeah, she's my light, my beacon. She's still so incredible. You play these records now they still burn everybody. I learned lots of stuff from her, including lots of words. She taught me a lot about the English language. It's just crazy. I remember hearing "the hybrid in you, it's the hybrid in me" and thinking, "What does that mean?" and then running to look it up. If she recommended something in an interview I'd basically walk over hot coals to find it.

Do you feel a sense of contentment now that you didn't feel when you were younger?

No, I'm never going to be content. I'm not content. I'm too greedy, too hungry. I don't even think I want to be contented, truth be told. I think another ridiculous lie that we're fed when we're young that somehow you reach nirvana when you get older. I think that's nonsense. I don't think the system really particularly wants us to find contentment because true contentment is power. I can absolutely say that I enjoy life and I have a lot of enthusiasm for it. But content? Never.

Can you imagine a time when you won't be on stage in front of people?

I know that I have to accept that there will be a time when I no longer get to do that. I got a taste of that during our hiatus. I realized then that performing is what I'm born to do and it's the one thing that I'm really good at. I also learned that I can probably live without that part—the performing—but I couldn't live without making music. That's what I meant when I said I had this feeling that I was an artist, not just an entertainer. I could learn to live with not being on a stage, but I'd always yearn to sing and write and communicate. I couldn't go without that.

Name

Shirley Manson

Vocation

Singer, Songwriter, Professional Misanthrope

Fact

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self-portrait with face mask courtesy of Shirley Manson