On learning how to improvise



Singer Candice Hoyes discusses maintaining easy access to her inner life, sitting with history, and being protective of her creative collaborators.

November 10, 2026 -

As told to Piotr Orlov, 2926 words.

Tags: Music, Family, Beginnings, Identity, Adversity, Inspiration, Collaboration.

How did mixing musical and community knowledge become the thing you wanted to pursue?

It began at a young age, 5 or 6. I love to read and I'm introverted. I'd spend a lot of time just writing songs, singing to myself, reading tons of books. One of my earliest memories as a kid was sitting at Jamaican parties that my parents would take us to. Jamaicans go to parties as a whole family. Kids come. My Uncle Neville is a very prominent physical therapist by day but also a voracious vinyl collector and a DJ/selector. So I would find a quiet corner—Neville's home had a funky room with some horse hair-type chairs—and I would read by myself. But the backdrop was him playing all kinds of music from the Caribbean diaspora. So there were already certain narratives flowing at the same time that just stayed with me into adulthood.

By narratives, do you mean the idea of taking information in while music is all around you?

Yes. Taking in stories by reading them and choosing them, but doing it in a way where I'm still grounded in my own context, surrounded by sounds and people that I love, smells and laughter, keeping that intergenerational atmosphere in the process of how I'm taking in ideas, as needed. I always cared to know what was going on. My sister and I would hide under the stairs—we'd talk and people watch, see who's dancing with whom. My grandparents would come to the parties and dance, so it was three generations at least. That was always how it was. That's my culture. I was pursuing my own thread in that atmosphere, which also typifies my work now. I've always kept that inner life very accessible to myself.

Do you remember some of the first topics of those explorations?

I wrote to myself—sketches and songs about my sister Suzanne and my cousin Kimberly. We had a singing group when I was 7, 8, 9. I started piano, and began writing songs; we would force people to listen to them in the living room. My grandmothers would line up in front of the mantle of the fireplace. The songs were about girl empowerment, every line was like, "We're always going to stick together…" All those years, I was in a predominantly white neighborhood on Long Island, and the earliest I experienced an aggressive, hostile situation in school was first grade. That informed the urgency around protecting all my sensibilities. But then I have a really nurturing, warm family, and I was also picking up on a lot of creativity inside the community, a lot of expressivity—maybe less so in their professional walks, but amongst ourselves. That's how I still think about art-making. I have personal layers that I keep very fresh. It helps a lot with improvisation too, and there's a lot of that in Nite Bjuti too.

You've been prominent as a singer from an early age. How did you start developing your voice? What enabled you to find your own voice?

There were a few influences at the same time. My cantor at church, Dr. Joan Wilson, was an incredible contralto

who played the organ. I remember the way that her voice and the organ filled the space. She was a gorgeous lady with a gorgeous smile and a small space in her front teeth, beautiful eyes, who was very close friends with my parents, loved kids, and would hug me warmly. My father was on the vestry board at our church, so they spent a lot of time together. She was a very approachable musical great, someone who, when I was praying below, her voice was above.

My maternal grandmother loved to sing. She would sing all day; she had a very high soprano. She also showed me the Lena Horne one-woman show at some point. And I was like, "She wrote the show, produced the show, and sang the show that's telling the story of her life? I love all of this." At that point, I was never thinking I'm going to do that, but it was there, and that's how I see my work, too. Also the library. I was so bookish—still am bookish—and libraries have all that audio. Once I read everything that I wanted to read, I moved into culling all the vinyl, CDs, and DVDs of musicals. Also PBS, like so many kids in the U.S.

I feel I'm part of a continuum of artists who tried to take on things with the greatest intention and seriousness and follow-through, which led to other abilities. Then those artists had to lean upon those newly learned abilities to create their own space, because a lot of avenues were not open to them. So I don't think of myself as an outlier. I'm a descendant, an extension of a history I'm always thinking about.

But at the same time, when you're extending something, you become an outlier—the next step or a stepping stone for others.

Hopefully it's an ascension of some kind. That is the feeling I'm in pursuit of, because everything else—popularity or trend or consumption—just doesn't ring the same way as learning something. Learning something is so rich, and it's such a great way to connect with other people. Like when you go to a new place where you don't speak the language, and you learn how to say, "How are you?" I like communication, and learning to access a connection, especially in a place where maybe the rest of the world thinks I don't belong. Then we know something that we wouldn't otherwise know. That's an important experience, too: learning all the rules just to break the rules. I think I realized that a lot through my parents and grandparents.

How so?

They came to this country from Jamaica and built their lives. They went to college here, and then met in their community, navigating spaces that didn't anticipate us or were skeptical of us. Yet they were transcendent in their pursuit of life, what they saw for themselves. They had to go through things that looked like solid blockades. When my grandmother—who is 103, and can be heard on my album—first came to the U.S., she couldn't fly directly into New York. She had to fly into Miami and then take the train up because of Jim Crow segregation. I think a lot about that. She went to FIT [the Fashion Institute of Technology], pursuing design in the 1950s and '60s. She flew back and forth almost every year to Jamaica, was renowned in Kingston among our community, and worked for Raul Blanco, a big designer in the '80s and '90s. Both my grandmothers were incredible seamstresses, ghost designers for white guys and brands. The point is, there's a lot to understand about who you are and what you have if you know your history.

My album has a lot of that in it. I'm trying to sit with that history as intensely as I can, super-sensitized to how much I have by knowing those who shaped me, loved me, and inspired me—everyone whose presence I've been in. That has a lot to do with the musician's path, which is very lonely, and filled with a lot of alienation. In the day-to-day, the pace of it, it can be a lot about your name, the whole "brand" part of everything. One of the best parts of making my album, a "saving grace" you might call it, was how I got to sit with these ancestors and people who mean a lot to me. That was present in the way that Sullivan Fortner and I came to our writing process. We would listen to certain albums and talk about them. He'd been listening to a whole bunch to Sun Ra for a time, and I was listening to *Secret Life of Plants*, Stevie Wonder, which is a big inspiration for *Expecting*.

Questions that Sullivan and I were often sitting with were a version of, "What does any of this mean anyway? Why do we do all of this?" Sometimes it all feels very tentatively held together. We're just going as hard as we can with the artistic pursuit. Making music and studying is expensive, the venues are strained, streaming music doesn't pay, the gatekeepers you have to go through, the conversations you need to build your practice. It's hard

just trying to make sense of it all. The whole landscape has changed so much. And we'd talk about it with great humor and introspection.

Yet the eternal spirit, the top note of my music, is the girl who got to come along with my parents into these somewhat complex but vivid places. It's not just nostalgia. It's not a notion. It's a place that remains super present for me. I think it's what makes New York work for me, because New York is a lot of logistics with values, some of which are amazing and some hard to sustain. The thing that helps me sustain myself is who I've been since I was a kid, my experience. In order to laugh about it, you have to feel like you have the skills to command what you're doing. And to trust yourself.

One of the things that you've done brilliantly is choosing collaborators, all creatively different but with overlapping musical and social values. How do you choose who you work with?

I like to work with people with whom I am coming into engagement. Even if we don't know each other well, the relationship must be very open-channel. With Val Jeanty in Nite Bjuti, the first time we played together in 2018, I was coming from a long Duke Ellington project I did, working with *Abyssinian Mass*, a through-composed piece by Wynton Marsalis, working on that for a year. Afterwards I was doing other chamber music and opera song recitals. I was working with the education department of Jazz at Lincoln Center, and they said, "What type of topic would you want to do next?" And I said, "Afrofuturism." They were like, "That sounds great. Go for it. Who do you want to bring?" And I said, "Val Jeanty." So I reached out to Val, and she said, "I want us to improvise."

Had you done that before?

No. I told her as much, and she's like, "Okay." We went to our studio for a whole day. Come to find out, I was perfectly suited for improvising with Val. She obviously is impeccable at this. As is Mimi. Bringing on Mimi Jones, the bassist, was one of Val's best ideas. She said something like, "We need roots," so that was when Mimi came into our lives to ground us. The first time we played was at Nublu, which was also the first time we improvised together. Val said, "Let's not rehearse," so we didn't rehearse. But I read a lot before we started playing, and that's where the lyrical content in Nite Bjuti comes from. I spend a lot of time with folklore, my own process that I've come up with from reading and taking in certain kinds of materials.

Nothing is written. The Nite Bjuti album is a complete improvisation. It exists in the space where it was made; it's truly just a snapshot of a moment. We don't notate chords. I don't write down lyrics. We talk to each other, and I just think about what Val and Mimi said, our points of connection on that day. The three of us have always had easy communication, and that's what comes through. This band has given me so much softness and strength. We are protective of each other against the harsh elements of the outside world, and we don't force it. It's a very healing thing to return to. And not just for us. We've been playing over the last five years, and the impact on the audience has been less performance and more the creation of group sonic meditative spaces.

We are completely responding to the environment. It's an uncommon experience for many audiences. We're putting a lot on them to come into, but we also attract people who love improvised experiences, those who seek it. All this to say, human energy is a large part of this music. It's definitely a lot about the audience in the room, and how the room feels. Sometimes it is a different kind of channeling.

Improvisation is very important in Black music and Black artistry. There's a deep purpose for it, and so the pursuit of well-rounded edges in the music is not always the thing. With lyrical singing, the better the tone that I produce, the more it has a physical sensation for me. It takes the most muscular gestures to support a very floaty tone. In "Expecting," those floaty notes are undergirded by real muscle. It's not for the weak. You're not a wallflower if you can sing those notes. That's a lot of physicality. It's very athletic. Somewhere in the body, there's a lot of churn.

That returns to the idea of needing to learn the rules and needing to become physically capable of doing things in order to subvert the art and push it forward.

The reason why "Expecting" is the title track has to do with how I fashioned its sound world, by taking a chance.

I found Minnie Riperton through my parents, and for a long time just listened admiringly. Then a few years ago, once we started writing the music, it emboldened me to take on harder songs, to try to go to the outer extremes of my range, to challenge myself and see what moved me. When my voice is doing new things, I feel new. It's kind of like me reading by myself in a room full of fascinating people. I can take in both at the same time. I'm feeling something, but it's also shifting my whole energy around all my work.

When first working on "Expecting," I was playing with the amazing guitarist, David Rosenthal. He asked, "You want to take it down a whole step?" And I was like, "Nope, I want to feel what this is like in the key that Minnie sang it in." David understood; he's brilliant harmonically. So we sat in the discomfort together and enjoyed it, and thought about how different those two keys would be. I remember it clearly. It was a warm day. The shades were down, his wonderful partner was in the next room, and the cats were walking around, while we worked between these keys. We popped down the whole step just to see what it felt like. I loved that. Some call it "rehearsal," but it is a liminal state. You have a compass inside you as a singer, which is like, "Where does my needle point?" So I said, "Let's amble back to the recorded key."

Lyrically, "Expecting" is such a mysterious incantation. The use of the third person: who is this narrator? There's a Black girl's experience at the center, as casual as it sounds, walking through the woods surrounded by all those strings and percussion, and at the end there's a consequence. It goes to show you that our stories are important. As seldom as we hear our stories highlighted and put in the forefront, they are consequential… That's why "Expecting" is a song I want to sing, a story I want to tell. It's how lineage is crossed. Maybe this is interesting to me as a counterweight, because of what we encounter now with streaming and AI. Or maybe it is just me doubling down on the thing I believe in. That's what an album's supposed to be, right?

Candice Hoyes recommends:

I am a believer in reading biographies. I feel that perspective will always keep an artist grounded in how fallible and imperfect the process is, and we manage to keep creating. How these pathways look indeterminate right until you turn a corner and make something you love.

I was giving a talk and someone uttered, "You may not be as good as (they named a singer who is not alive)." I shuddered as I remembered that the next morning for *one* reason: that commenter is in mental quicksand! I don't do that, and it is the worst possible trap to think about that. It's the type of unsolved mystery that might keep a person from being a doer and living their truth. Who cares who is better. You will always find some people who prefer your work and it will progress. Your version is "better" (to somebody!)

Being an artist mother is profoundly under-credited and vital to the innovation of art, if you think across time, from Ella Fitzgerald to Geri Allen to Ming Smith.

solo travel for pleasure is so hard to come by at times, I concede, but in my experience it is the antidote to writer's block. I don't purposefully jar myself out of writer's block because it's natural. I love how lucid and playful my thoughts get during solo travel, usually the music starts dripping or pouring out.

my final tip is to esteem the last minute. I have made beautiful powerful works at the last minute, sometimes because I was exhausted and needed a pause. All minutes are equal in my eyes.

Name
Candice Hoyes

Vocation
soprano, musician

Bảo Ngoˆ