

Sufjan Stevens on songwriting, collaboration, and the myth of tortured artist



June 8, 2017 - Sufjan Stevens is an American songwriter and multi-instrumentalist who has released nearly a dozen albums over the past two decades in a variety of different styles. In addition to releasing concept albums dedicated to everything from entire U.S. States to deconstructed Christmas songs, Stevens is also a frequent collaborator, having recorded with a variety of musicians as well as creating new scores for the New York City Ballet. This year sees the release of *Planetarium*, an album based on the solar system in which Stevens collaborates with Bryce Dessner, James McAlister, and Nico Muhly.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2835 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings.

You're known as a solo artist, but much of your work is collaborative. What is it about collaboration that you enjoy?

I think music is inherently social anyway so it lends itself to collaboration. I came of age as a musician in isolation—writing songs alone, like many people, in my room in front of a four track or in front of a computer or spending hours and hours and hours alone with the oboe in a practice room. I remember becoming obsessed with the piano because my sister took lessons and when she was out of the house I would sneak into the living room and play. It was almost like I did it covertly for so long as a child and then when I left home and went to university and started meeting people it became clear that music was a language people used to connect. You connect with other people often by the nature of their tastes.

I got turned onto the concept of the band because I actually didn't really ever listen to contemporary music made by bands when I was growing up. I just listened to classic rock or classical music or top 40 MTV stuff. I didn't really have this understanding that there was this *other* world. I didn't know anything about independent music or the way bands could cultivate a kind of creative family. So when I was in university I made friends who also were casual musicians and may or may not have been in bands in high school. Just kind of hanging out with them became about making music and making sounds and getting together and sharing ideas.

I had a really horrible, really cheesy band in college that taught me a lot about being creative. It was really, really collaborative. I wasn't singing. I wasn't the lead singer. I wasn't writing most of the music. I just played the oboe or a little piano and then I eventually learned guitar through that experience and started learning how to write songs. Writing songs that weren't necessarily for me, they were for the band. They were for the lead singer of the band. I always associated songwriting with some kind of social networking.

I liked making music but I didn't really like being in the band because I found that dealing with the personalities was difficult. Everyone had such egos and different concepts of what they wanted the band to be, what they wanted it to sound like. I extracted myself out of that and decided to make music on my own. That's when I started just writing songs for myself in my early 20s. When I moved to New York I inevitably met so many other musicians and artists that it reignited that kind of social aspect. Even when I was working on my own music and producing my own records and directing my own shows, I would still always gather a team together of friends and family. I always liked having a team, being part of that team.

There are certain solo musicians who do everything themselves in a particular way, but most solo artists still have a crew—people they play with, people that they bounce ideas off of. They're usually not working entirely in solitude.

I've kind of prided myself on the fact that I recorded almost everything on *Michigan* by myself and played everything

from the bass to the drums to the piano. There are other people playing on it but I was really very kind of possessive about that process. I wanted to own it from every angle. As I get older, I realize my own limitations and that it isn't always serving the music to do everything myself. As I've gotten older I've also realized that there's so much to learn in collaboration and by inviting people into your creative world. Now I'm much more curious about hearing what other people have to say. Also, you get tired of your own voice after a while and your own habits. That's why making the *Planetarium* record was really fun, because it's the result of four really creatively developed people with very different sensibilities and different agendas coming together.

Having multiple creative projects can be healthy. It can take the pressure off of your main project and provide a little perspective.

It's so important. I see that now, in retrospect, but it's also important just in terms of the healthiness of my career. It's important to really diversify as much as you can and to challenge old habits and to introduce new ones and to really always want to try new things. Don't get too hung up on a single thing. I've been really fortunate to have a lot of these outside projects to keep me going.

Are you always juggling multiple projects?

There are multiple burners and back burners, a variety of pots on the stove. It can be hard though. To leverage your whole life on this kind of insurmountable creative drive is a little bit tricky because you don't want to exhaust yourself.

How do you avoid that?

It's been difficult to figure that out and I've been getting much better at organizing my time and being efficient. I used to really believe in the creative value of agony and I don't really know if I can subscribe to that anymore. That old idea that if it wasn't painful then it wasn't meaningful.

It's a stereotype that we've been sold, even in the history books. The anguished genius. We've been conditioned to believe that there's some kind of relationship between the creative life and dysfunctional mental health, that somehow there's kind a correlation between the two. I don't subscribe to that anymore because it's just too exhausting. I've become really good about delegating and organizing my time. When you're just an artist floating out there in the ether you're made to believe that you have to create great art through pain and suffering. It isn't true.

Are you someone, either by nature or by necessity, that works on music every day in a regimented way?

No, not at all. In fact, my creative practice is very sporadic. You'd be surprised at how little I actually sit down and work on music. At the same time, I'm always thinking about it and imagining it. I am constantly thinking of melodies. Sometimes I have to really go out of my way to subdue the kind of intonation that's going on inside of my mind. It's better for me to distract myself from music because if I'm working on it too much I get kind of overwhelmed and overstimulated. I find it's better if I allow two hours here and there, maybe every other day to work on a particular project. I just did music for a new ballet, and I wrote almost all of it in two days. I spent another month editing and rewriting it, doing revisions. That, for me, was a real achievement and I felt really proud of myself that I had been so efficient.

To write it I sort of meditated on or conceptualized movement and then just tried to express that on the piano and I did it measure by measure. First thought, best thought. I think that's a great way to get things rolling, to motivate ideas and to get the momentum going. I just did that for two days until I felt like I had something to work with.

***Planetarium* was actually in progress before you made Carrie & Lowell, which is such a deeply personal record. Was it nice to be able to work on something a little more abstract—songs about space and the planets—rather than only working on these intense songs about your family?**

For sure. With *Planetarium* I set my mind on the cosmos because I felt it was the only thing that could really satisfy the nature of the commission and the collaboration with these other artists. I felt like it was abstract enough and

vast enough and open-ended enough to give me ample opportunities lyrically and conceptually.

To go from that to then writing songs about my dead mother was really traumatic. I found it much more difficult to grapple with some of these very horrible personal tragedies in song. It didn't feel right. It didn't feel just. It didn't feel comfortable and it didn't feel artful. There were these attempts, little lyrical and literary gestures here and there, to try to make sense of this loss through analogy and mythology but they were so unsatisfying. They fell so short of the experience that I felt like my artistry and my creative methods had kind of failed me. It was interesting to have to just accept that and reckon with that. In the end I had to just allow that to be what it was and accept it as just being this one chapter in my creative life.

Is it like coming to terms with the fact that sometimes it's never going to feel 100% right or recognizing that this is as good a way as I can address this?

Yeah. It's as good as it gets or it's all I have. It's all I can give. It's a real uncomfortable kind of environment in which to reside when you're having to reconcile with resignation... and that's really what a lot of those songs on *Carrie & Lowell* are about. It's about resigning myself to *this* feeling and to *these* facts and to *this* event. There's no artful explanation of that experience. It just is what it is.

When we toured the record though, we spent a lot of time on reinvention to allow ourselves some distance from the content. Even though it was very much grounded in mortality and rooted in these folk songs that were very simple and kind of pure and plain on the record, we allowed it to transcend until the arrangements and the show itself became almost like a spectral memorial for my mother, for death. We very carefully augmented it. We found ways to perform it that alleviated some of the tragedy. That's how I got through it.

You've written a fair amount of personal songs, but your fictionalized songs—songs about places and things—are often equally poignant.

Music is so powerful, it's such a force, it's inexplicable. It's universal. Also, music is actual sound waves reverberating and moving through you. It has a physical presence and certain tones and frequencies can be so emotionally riveting. I developed my songwriting voice in the tradition of fiction writing, using techniques that I learned in writing workshops. I'd just apply all of those techniques to songwriting. I conditioned myself to really "show, don't tell" and to use active verbs and dynamic nouns and be as specific as possible. Within songs you want to create scenes, establish setting, and develop the narrative around conflict. You learn to play around with situational irony and funny juxtapositions, all things that are very useful when you are still learning the trade. However, as you get older you realize that all of those things can be crutches too. You can really get cornered by them.

Literary techniques provide a blueprint that allows you to see for yourself the beauty of language and the power that it has, but you also learn that language can't always be reduced to a formula or a literary analogy. Sometimes you have to let the beauty speak for itself, but that is a lesson you only really learn by writing lots of songs and also kind of discovering yourself.

Are you someone who will chip away at something until it works or is there a point where you just have to leave it alone and do something else?

Now, more than ever, I try not to force anything and I try to be myself. The goal is to identify what the song is trying to be and then be a good steward of it. That's kind of where I'm at now.

Is that a process of just getting out of your own way enough to let whatever should naturally come out of you just happen?

I think so. A lot of those flourishes and gestures and aesthetic wanderings on earlier records were smoke and mirrors, a lot of obfuscation that were probably the result of me feeling either inadequate or feeling coy. There's a lot of role playing and constructing facades. It's really exciting to do that because you can learn so much about your craft and your voice and it's a great education musically to venture into different genres and different worlds. You can also get lost doing that and I often would lose sight of the greater purpose of my work and lose sight of my

voice, which is the most tragic thing.

I've been making records and making music for 15 years and it's only now that I fully recognize that people really just wanted to hear my voice. They just want to hear me sing. I didn't always recognize that. Early on I think maybe I worried more about being categorized and I also just always felt really ambitious about other things. I wanted to make arty movies and create the soundtracks for them, I wanted to make Christmas music, I wanted to do graphic design, I wanted to see what happens when you let a guitar solo go on for 15 minutes. It was maybe a little masochistic to do things like, say, record the same song 10 times in different keys, you know?

I was just curious to try things. When I look back on some of those things I'm like, "That's very interesting but it's also kind of a waste of time." It was distracting me from doing what I really should've been doing, which was writing new songs instead of rerecording the same song over and over, getting too wrapped up in experiments. I don't regret doing any of that stuff, but all I'm saying is that I don't really have that problem so much anymore. Now I'm very aware of prioritizing my time, so if I'm going to work on a ballet I can't spend nine months on it. It just doesn't make sense. It's a disservice to me and my work and my art. It's a disservice to songwriting. That's the thing that, above all else, I've come to respect the most.

You've made lots of different kinds of records, many of which feel like they're rooted in some kind of experiment. Are there kinds of records that you want to make that you haven't been able to yet?

Yeah, definitely. I want to make a dance record. I haven't done that and I'm not getting any younger, so I should do it while I still feel like dancing. I was actually working on something but then the election happened, so I was wondering: *Can I make an angry dance record?* I also want to do more ambient stuff and create more soundscape sort of things. I'll always be in a kind of furious pursuit of "the song"—which feels a lot like running towards a horizon that's always running away from you.

That's basically the cornerstone of my work. I won't be happy until I write the perfect song and it just hasn't happened yet. Every time you feel like you get a little closer and then you learn something new about yourself. It's never quite perfect. You have to try it again.

Sufjan Stevens recommends:

When it comes to recommending new things I realize that I do tend to listen to a lot of the same old stuff that I listened to when I was younger, but not in a nostalgic way. I'm actually still curious and still scrutinizing it. I grew up with older sisters and they all listened to Prince so I grew up with all this Prince in the house. I just kind of came of age and went through puberty to the soundtrack of *Purple Rain*, *Parade*, *Under the Cherry Moon* and *Sign o' the Times* all playing in the background. I still listen to those records, but when I hear them now I'm just so mystified and amazed by them. I mean, Prince really wasn't of this world. So I used to listen to Prince just for fun and then maybe I listened to it kind of nostalgically, but now I can't listen to his music without marveling at the craftsmanship of it. I get focused on elements that I never really considered before, like the production, the reverb, the delays and the drum machines, the way things are mixed. It's just endlessly, endlessly fascinating to me. **So maybe that's a good thing to suggest, revisit the things you loved as a kid with fresh eyes and ears. It's kind of amazing.**

Name

Sufjan Stevens

Vocation

Musician

Fact

Sufjan Stevens is an American songwriter and multi-instrumentalist who has released nearly a dozen albums over the past two decades in a variety of different styles. In addition to releasing concept albums dedicated to everything from entire U.S. States to deconstructed Christmas songs, Stevens is also a frequent collaborator, having recorded with a variety of musicians as well as creating new scores for the New York City Ballet. This year sees the release of *Planetarium*, an album based on the solar system in which Stevens collaborates with Bryce Dessner, James McAlister, and Nico Muhly.



Andrea Morrison