

October 25, 2017 - Carmen Villain is a half-Norwegian and half-Mexican musician, born in the USA who now lives in Oslo, Norway. Earlier this year she released her second full-length album, *Infinite Avenue*. Here she discusses the pros and cons of working totally on your own, the importance of connecting to the joy in your process, and how creative choices are sometimes just practical choices in disguise.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2206 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration, Process, Collaboration, Independence, Education, Anxiety.

Carmen Villain on being resourceful

I remember seeing you perform several years ago in Oslo. At the time you were struggling a little trying to figure out what you would do next in regards to making a record and dealing with record labels.

I think that was definitely the darkest phase for me. I was quite negative at the time as I was really struggling with that feeling of "nothing works." You know when you keep meeting roadblocks with everything and then your brain tells you that you're a failure no matter what you do? I was there for a while.

You always have to fight that irrational negative thinking, but you also know that some of it is kind of rational as well. It's this constant fight. I've had tons of stuff come easy to me in life and I need to always acknowledge that. I'm spoiled in many ways. But the last few years were hard in terms of trying to finish something on my own. It's just been like knocking my head against the wall in a lot of ways because it's been really lonely. Nobody comes in and helps you.

It's basically getting to the point where you can say, "Okay, this is reality. Nobody gives a fuck and you just have to do it all by yourself otherwise it's not going to happen." It's hard to find the right way to do things sometimes. So yeah, I reckon that was probably the worst time a few years ago. Somehow I managed to pull myself together and finish it.

It is difficult when you're doing everything on your own and you put something out into the world and it's sort of like, "Is anybody hearing me?" You're competing with a gazillion other artists who are all going through some version of the same thing, just trying to get someone's attention.

It's really tough. There's so much noise and there's just so much *stuff*. It's like a continuous churn of noise and I totally get it. I understand how it's hard to get people to just give something a listen. I think that's the hardest part. I think that has been the most frustrating thing for me along the way. If people don't like it then that's totally cool. That's great. If maybe two out of 10 people like it, that's great because two people are actually listening and hearing what you made. Once you've finished making the music and finished the whole thing then it's almost like it doesn't exist unless it hits somebody else's ears. It's kind of like that tree that falls in the forest. If nobody is there to hear it does it actually make a sound?

I think the most important thing to me—the hardest part of the whole process—is that at times making music was fun and engaging and just a great place to be by myself, which was great. Then other times it's been so frustrating and lonely. What I've learned from this whole thing is that it's important to try to keep the process of making the music fun and interesting so that it gives you something. You have to retain the joy of that part of the process. You can't control *anything* that comes afterwards. You basically throw yourself to the hounds and then you have to live with whatever happens. So long as the process was good and interesting and made you grow in some way, then at the end of the day it's worth it.

Several musicians I spoke to in Oslo mentioned the difficulty they had in getting their music heard outside of Norway. How much of a struggle has it been to get your music to a larger audience in other parts of the world?

These days you can get your music out if you have the right people supporting you. I'm lucky because now I have a great label and great people that work promotion and stuff. It's definitely easy to feel a bit isolated here in Norway because it's very small. Everybody knows everybody, which is nice in some ways, but limiting in others. You have to make things happen yourself, which can also be good. You have to be resourceful. It can be hard to feel like you're a part of a bigger community here, at least for me.

I think the most difficult thing is touring and playing live, which is so important. It's kind of what makes you feel like a real artist. Here it's so expensive, and if you're going to go tour the States it's going to cost you so much money. It's a complicated balance of finding the right time to do it and the right people to work with, all with the understanding that it will likely lose money. If you are fortunate you might be able to get some government funded money from Norway, which we are extremely lucky to have. We get a lot of support for the arts here. In that way, it's really good. It's quite helpful.

You recently released a new record, Infinite Avenue, which was several years in the making. Most people I know that make any kind of art also have to do something else to support themselves. It's so easy for the creative part of you to be the thing that gets neglected the most after everything else.

Always. It starts so early in life. Obviously, like anyone else, you have to survive and make money and be able to afford to live. It's funny because for me, even though music is probably the most important thing that I do on my own—except for raising my child—I still don't feel like I can allow myself to prioritize it the way I should. Sometimes I wonder whether that's just ingrained in our brains. As soon as you stop being a kid and stop doing arts in school, the world changes. Suddenly it's, "Okay, now it's serious business. Now we're going to mold you into being this productive citizen that works and pays taxes." I think you lose this natural connection with art really early on because of the way we're educated. You are trained at an early age not to view those things as important.

It's really hard not to feel guilty about prioritizing your art, as opposed to just being a good citizen and working a regular job so you afford the right place to live and the right furniture or whatever. I get it. I also want a nice place to live, which is why I work. But as a result I often sacrifice the one thing that really gives me something, some deeper fulfillment. It's sad that it's like that. Of course, it's just life as well. You've got to make a living.

It is interesting how much our value of those sort of things is tied up in its success. If you're a successful musician it doesn't feel weird to say, "I'm a musician." If you're struggling, it feels different.

It's so ridiculous. The common perception is often, "Oh, you're not really an artist unless you're a well-known one." It's really weird. It's hard to say it. Even I find it really hard to say sometimes. If people ask me what I do I'm like, "Ugh, I kind of make music." It's ridiculous that I can't just think of myself as a musician and say that out loud. A person shouldn't be embarrassed to say they are an artist or a writer or a musician, but something about the way those things are perceived in our culture makes it feel that way.

You worked with Jenny Hval for a song on your record. What made her a good collaborator?

I haven't really known Jenny that long. I met her a few years ago and we became friends. Every time you spend time with her you always learn something new or you have a good laugh about something. She's just extremely inspiring. She actually does treat her art as art. She respects it. She sees herself as an artist and she's not ashamed of it. I think that she's a good example of how you can just live your life and be it. Obviously she's worked hard for many years to get where she is now and be at a place where she can spend time just doing her art, but that's partly due to the mentality she has about what she does. She's an artist and she has never seen herself as anything else. I admire that.

Has your way of working changed radically over the years? Your music, even though it often includes loops and layers, also feels very restrained to me.

It's really hard to be restrained. It's so hard not to always add more. It's so much fun to add more, you know? More sounds, more textures. Sometimes you need to add more to create the little things that happen in the background of the songs, things that people maybe don't really notice but somehow enhance the overall vibe of the thing. My new record is definitely more stripped back than anything I've previously done. Definitely less guitars. I love the guitar but at the moment I'm so bored of playing it. Everything that I'm making now is just all keys and synths and weird hardware and stuff like that.

I think it's important to try and always change the way you work and, at least for me, it's helpful to make rules for yourself. One of the rules for this new record was that I wasn't going to put any real drums on there. That was an easy rule to make because I don't play drums and I don't have a drum set. I just used drum machines where I needed to. I just worked with what I had access to and that defined the parameters.

I was also thinking about being able to play it live and tour. Last time around I had to say no to quite a few shows sadly because I needed four people onstage to play the songs. With five people in the band it's just fucking crazy expensive to tour. Creative choices are often just practical choices in disguise.

Sometimes that's how the best things happen, by working organically with what you have.

Definitely. I don't have that much stuff. I have a few little bits and bobs of gear. I do what I can with the very limited experience I have. You learn as you go. I'd watch endless YouTube videos on how to do this or that in Logic. How do you program a sample into a synth? Whatever. It's just like, "Oh my God." It requires so much patience doing everything by yourself without any kind of real experience, but that's how you learn.

A lot of my record is probably recorded completely wrong and it probably sounds wrong in some ways, but I don't care. I don't think it's really necessary for it to be done correctly or for the recordings to be really good quality or whatever. As long as the result creates the feeling that I want, it's fine. You do what you can with what you have. I think that's okay.

That's definitely the way I listen to music as well. I never really think about how it's produced or all that stuff. It's just about the initial, "Do I love this? Do I like this? Does it make me feel a certain way?" If it doesn't touch me the first time, even if it's meant to be the Record of the Year or whatever,

I can usually appreciate that it's good music but I won't necessarily listen to it again. If it doesn't make you feel something, it doesn't matter how perfect the production is.

That's the fun thing with music. It's so extremely subjective. It's an internal experience. It's not something you can physically touch. It's all about feeling your way there, both as a listener and as a musician. If you're making music and you're not really feeling your way through the process, it sounds mechanical and boring. Or maybe that's just what I tell myself to make myself feel better when it seems like I don't know what I'm doing. I'm fine with that.

Little list of inspirations by Carmen Villain:

A Woman Under The Influence - Cassavetes (Perfect film, makes me cry and laugh and angry and sad. Gena Rowlands is amazing in it)

Deserto Rosso - Antonioni (Beautiful and to me a perfect visual representation of mental fog/pollution)

Love Streams - Cassavetes (includes one of the best lines ever: "I'm almost not crazy now")

The White Album - Joan Didion (love the way she writes and her observations in this)

Elena Ferrante - The Days of Abandonment (rage! Nervous breakdown!)

The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster - Richard Brautigan (collected poetry)

Name

Carmen Villain

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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