

Cass McCombs on songwriting



January 3, 2017 - Cass McCombs is a critically acclaimed American songwriter. His ninth album, *Mangy Love*, was released last year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2440 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

When you were a kid did you always think you'd be a songwriter?

When you're a kid you want to play guitar, but nobody wants to be a songwriter when they're a kid. Actually, I wanted to be a dancer. Then I wanted to be an actor. Finally, I wanted to be a guitar player.

Who were your guitar heroes?

There are so many. Shit. My guitar heroes were not the common guys on the cover of the magazine, usually. I mean, I love Hendrix, but people that I rip off all the time are other songwriters who I think are brilliant guitar players—Robert Smith or someone like that. I think Lou Reed is a brilliant guitar player.

Did you start making songs from a pretty early age?

Yeah, about 14. Jokey, jokey songs. I'm trying to remember one. It was cartoon characters, making up cartoon characters. Fuck, I can't remember them. They were very childish but, you know, I was also actually a child. A little later I played in rock and roll bands—around 1990, 1992. I was a kid though. I had no brain.

Do you remember the first song you ever wrote that made you think, "This is actually pretty good. Maybe I should keep doing this"?

Did I ever think that? No. I've never thought that. *(laughs)* I still don't think that. It's terrible. I hate what I write. Some people are really self-confident about what they do. I lampoon confidence. It seems ridiculous to me. It seems way more wise to try and transform.

What was the compulsion to keep doing it then?

At some point it's the only thing that you can do. I did demolition for a little while, like destroying things. Destroying houses. That's the only other thing I was good at. I mean, yeah. So why keep doing it? Obsession, I guess.

Do you find that your approach to song making has changed radically over the years?

It's more fun now. It used to be such a drag. It used to be so hard, and now it's not hard. I want to write more explicitly. It's more like the way people talk. It's giving me a lot of life, a lot of ideas, just to listen to people talking. It's not even what they're saying anymore, but how they sound. It used to be that I just copied what people said. Now I'm more interested in the way people sound and the music of their voice. It could all be "goo-goo-ga-ga" or nonsense but it doesn't matter. It's about the sound of it. It sounds nice. Like the rain.

When you say that you wish you could make songs that are more direct, does that mean making songs with more literal lyrics? You're known for being so non-literal most of the time.

Not too literal. I've done that. Did that. I don't think that's that interesting though. There's a time to be direct. You can really be concise. On the ride over here, I was listening to these three women organizers behind the Black Lives Matter movement speaking on the radio. They were really, really clear with what they were saying. I wish music was that clear.

You mention that music-making isn't as hard as it used to be. What changed?

When you're young, you make anything hard on yourself. Anything. Everything. Your relationships are so fucking hard, and when they fall apart you're so destroyed. Now I'm old and I don't care anymore, you know? It's bad, too. It's a bad feeling sometimes, to not care as much. I was talking to a friend the other day, a friend who's very adept at meditation, entrenched in zen. He's totally entrenched in zen. We were talking about frustrations with other people. It can be anything. It can be a taxi driver snapping at you, or just how we interact with other people walking down the street, and the anxiety it gives us. What is tolerance? What would the yogis suggest we do with our intolerance? Where do we shove it? I think it was interesting even to just survey the topics of frustration with other people. Because even just talking about it is somehow soothing and makes it lighter. Everyone is so tightly wound these days, but you don't know where the other guy is coming from. If some guy snaps at you for no reason, what if he just found out something terrible happened to someone he loved? You don't know. Be nice. We're all volcanoes at some point.

Do you find that getting older has made you more empathetic? More zen?

I don't know. I like having a friend who's entrenched in zen. I thought about going through full entrenchment myself, but you know. It's a big commitment.

How do you approach songwriting?

I actually start with the words. So wherever I am, I've got my notebook. I can jot down lines, if they appear. Mostly, I just love to play guitar. That's where it all is. Just noodling on the guitar. Noodling not as a derogatory. I've heard it for years and years as a derogative. I recently did a show with Phil Lesh from the Grateful Dead. He instructed us to noodle a lot. Before that I'd only heard "noodle" used as a... what's it called?

A pejorative. As in, something is too noodley. A guitarist noodles around too much. It's usually talked about as a bad thing.

Yeah, he's like, "Noodle a lot. Noodle until you think you can't noodle any longer... and then noodle some more." Really long noodles. I was like, "Oh, I love noodles. They're delicious."

Did you grow up listening to the Dead?

Of course. Yeah. It's entrenched... entrenched, god! I've never used the word entrenched in my whole life, and now it's stuck. It's entrenched. Anyway, the Grateful Dead... It's the music of the Bay, among other things. There's lots of music from the Bay, but it's a part of the culture. It's unavoidable. People seem to like them now, but people really hated them for such a long time. I kind of miss those days, funnily enough. When Kurt Cobain appeared on Rolling Stone with the "Kill the Grateful Dead" t-shirt. That was really divisive because I liked both of them at the time. But I thought it was funny. People hating on the Grateful Dead. I feel a little more comfortable with people hating on the Grateful Dead as opposed to everyone loving the Grateful Dead. That's just me though. Because everyone hated them back then. They were the most hated. The most hated and somehow also the most loved. It's such a complicated and really maligned period in time and in music. I mean, the Dead and the Haight-Ashbury and the acid tests and the Airplane and Janis, it's the '60s. The Diggers, the SF Mime Troupe, the Hell's Angels, the Black Panthers. It was a historic time. Really relevant.

Are you excited to play shows?

Well, yeah. Unfortunately, we don't really make a lot of money. We make very little. I would love to stay on

tour, but at some point, you know... Sometimes we lose money on playing certain smaller towns. I wish we could just stay on the road forever. I like traveling. I like playing music. I like the party. It's a good party.

You could play solo, which is cheaper.

No, I don't do that. Just the way this project has gone, I've always played with people. I always say I don't have a style, but I guess that's wrong because I don't play solo and playing solo is a style. That's one thing I know I'm not: a solo act. Maybe at some point I would like to do solo guitar stuff. I've been working on a lot of solo guitar stuff and instrumental music. But playing solo shows? It seems scary. People are scary.

It feels safer to have a band behind you?

Yeah. And I guess it's about what you want to achieve in that space. It could be spoken-word, noise, whatever, but it could just be a fun time. When we're making a set list it's like we're trying to create a diverse set of almost contradictory kinds of feelings—from loneliness to exuberance. It's fun. It's entertainment. It can be really intense and loud or just some good old country riffage. It can be all that. Why can't it be everything? Why not at least try to get at all those feelings.

Is there a certain kind of feeling that tends to dominate all of your work?

I mean, just a few feelings that I return to over and over. I can't seem to land on anything and just stay there. It's like, "This is definitely the feeling. This is my favorite feeling. You know what? Actually, no, this one's pretty good. This feeling, oh this is a nice feeling..." and then you go back to the feeling you first started with. I guess I'm a little unstable because I like being sad and I like being silly. I don't really like thinking about myself in terms of pronouns or describing my emotional state too much, but it's really hard not to. You know what, the one constant feeling I guess is that I love the feeling of playing the guitar. It's not an emotional feeling. It's just the feeling of the strings on my fingers. I love that feeling the most.

Do you have a lot of guitars?

Kind of. They're spread all over the country. Yeah. I love guitars. Each one has 100 songs in them, for each person who touches them. We should all just share our guitars. There should be lending libraries for guitars. Everyone should have them.

How many do you take when you go out on the road?

Usually just one. I have a Strat electric guitar that I like. I like the way it sounds and I'm used to it. I'm comfortable. I like a fine, well-oiled machine when it comes to guitars. It's better to take the working car than the vintage model—the sweet old truck that only goes 50 miles and hour—which looks cool but might break down every five seconds.

How do you know when a song is done?

I mean, nothing's ever done. I don't think anyone knows when something is really done. There's just doing it and not doing it. You do it until you don't want to do it anymore. Then hopefully, someone else will take it over and keep on doing it. Songs are not really from any individual. There are all these lawsuits about plagiarism, Led Zeppelin has been going through that lately. It bums me out. The idea of intellectual property is kind of a trap. It's just a way to get by, which I guess is fair because most of us are broke.

Is songwriting one of those things you get better at as you keep doing it?

I don't think I'm better than I used to be. In fact, I don't even relate to myself anymore sometimes. Sometimes I don't even relate to the lyrics I send off to publish. It's weird. I don't know. I really don't know what the feeling is—like some weird disassociation happens. If you've done something for decades it's like you stop even

thinking about why you're doing it. You've been parting your hair on the left side for thirty years, you just want to keep on parting your hair that way. You're not even going to think about it. You shave from left to right for years and years, are you even thinking about it when you do it? I think music is muscle memory. Yeah. I can't really tell you why I do something I do, whether it's writing a song or any of those innocuous, subconscious things. If it's subconscious, we really need a doctor to tell us what we're actually doing. I think that's what music journalism should be. They should be doctors for us sick music people.

Just let me tell you...

...what you're actually doing. There's something you *think* you're doing but you're delusional. You think you're noodling, but what you're really doing is talking about your childhood in a really negative way. You're really acting out.

All paths lead back to noodling. What are the other most derided guitar styles?

You know, something like wanking, which is just like when you tilt your head back and really bend those strings with some gusto, a little bit of bravado, a little sexiness. It's a little vain, a little masturbatory. That's wanking. It was a no-no for a long time. It was bad. But there is a resurgence now. Wanking. At the festivals you see wankers now. They want to be heard so badly. They just have to wank, wank, wank. Fake jazz is another one.

How can you differentiate between fake jazz and real jazz?

Impostor jazz. I like to dabble in fake jazz. I like messing with it as a joke, a musical joke. You know, it's "the greatest American art form" and maybe the greatest art form of all time, so I just like putting a Mona Lisa mustache on top of it every once in a while.

Five Recommendations from Cass McCombs:

Five things... hmm... like Aladdin in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, I'd wish for more wishes. When our wishes come true they turn out to be a curse. Kidding. Let's see...

1. *Mangy Love* bibliography: Autobiography of Malcolm X (w/ Alex Haley); first-hand accounts of African capture & enslavement: Venture Smith, Ayubah Suleiman Diallo, Olaudah Equiano; If He Hollers Let Him Go by Chester Himes; George Jackson (Letters) & Edward Bunker (Education of a Felon) who stood on opposite sides of 60s San Quentin; Book of Druidry by Ross Nichols; Herbs & Things by Jeanne Rose; 13 Stories and 13 Epitaphs by William T. Vollmann; Christ in Concrete by Pietro di Donato
2. Music: Shuggie Otis, Alan Toussaint, Meters, Bob Marley, Beatles' White Album, William de Vaughn, Raekwon, Nas, Bill Withers, The Cure, Michael Martin Murphy, Waylon Jennings, Gil Scott Heron, Miles Davis, Prince, ZZ Top, Meat Puppets, Elliott Smith, Jerry Garcia, Judee Sill. Many more...
3. Pacifica radio
4. Albert Herter (the living one)
5. The invariable mysteries one cannot anticipate. (what a cop out!!)

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Vocation

Musician, Songwriter

Fact

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