

On the benefits of being a lat@ bloomer



Composer and guitarist Marisa Anderson discusses committing to improvisation, freeing your mind with kinetic energy, where collaboration can take you, and the economics of touring.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2590 words.

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

Where does your love of place and process come from? How does it appear in your music?

Most of what I do is made out of other stuff. That's true for all of us. We're the sum of our influences. I don't have any tricks up my sleeve. Those influences are folk, country, and gospel. It's clear to hear that in what I do. I'm not necessarily a folk, country, or gospel artist, but those paths braid and show up. The common thread in everything I do is my phrasing. If I were a horn player, my breath, that's straight out of those kinds of music.

The long view is that all of that music is rooted in place, in a way that a community tells its story to itself and to others throughout time. A lot of music is specific to its community. Those specificities are about trains of thought or social issues, whereas gospel music or folk music, those are ways of telling personal stories.

For example, if you trace the arc of a song like "[Beat the Drum Slowly](#)," the trunk of the tree is songs about death, songs that tell you what to do with a body when it dies. You wrap the body in white linen, you put coins on its eyes, you put it in a cart, horses, whatever. "Streets of Laredo," "St. James Infirmary," "Beat the Drum Slowly." There's a bunch of these songs. They're in Ireland, in Texas, in New Orleans. When I was in Europe, people were like, "Oh, yeah, there's one here, there's one there." The story and the need to tell the story in song, it's not isolated to a place. It's something that connects places, connects people, and connects us to who was before and who comes after us.

You've walked across the country multiple times. Is there a clear link between movement and creativity for you?

Any activity that is somatic or kinetic frees your mind. Driving does it, walking does it. Cooking, for me, does it. Anything where I'm engaged, that frontal bit, there's something to do. My body's moving. With walking, there's a rhythm. There's a pace and phrasing to walking that definitely influences me. My mind is really free. My long walks these days tend to be full-day, not multi-day anymore. It's particularly in cities that I like to do it. I'll go 10 miles easy, walk from wherever I am to wherever the water is. That's where the oldest part of the city is. Walk around in that area, then find my way back somehow.

Do you notice anything about your walking cadence and the way you approach the guitar?

All my stuff begins at a certain tempo. It doesn't end up there, but that tempo is definitely my footstep. As you build a piece, you adjust it to the tempo it wants to be. Pretty much everything I do starts off with this medium

gait. Duple meter is pretty ingrained, but I fuck with that. I will consciously try to do phrases that are odd by starting on my right foot and ending on my left foot, knowing that if I start a phrase on my right foot, then the next phrase starts on my left foot, I know it's an odd tempo. I do that a lot.

How did you start improvising?

I grew up playing classical. In classical music, there's a boss. What's on the page is the boss. What the composer intended, that's the boss. In classical music, you're not your own boss ever. That's fine, that's for a reason. Any song that's sung tends to lend itself to having a structure that you have to follow. Words are the boss, a lot of times. They're the boss of how a song goes, when it starts and when it ends, and what order the emotions lay out in.

I'm not against structure. I'm not even against doing things the same way. But in the creative process, I like to be free. Once it's the performance, there's room for all of it in my music. Some things I do exactly the same, and that's its own fun thing, is to adhere to that. Some things I do differently. In performance, what changes is the dynamic in the room.

Can you name what it feels like to be lost in music?

I don't think I can. That's taking words and putting them to something wordless. That limits whatever it is, that mystery.

Has your confidence with improv grown over time?

Definitely. It takes training. I wouldn't even call it confidence, I would call it committing. Whatever idea you're having, you don't question it. It's like improv partners in standup comedy. It's the "yes, and" rule. To apply that to your own self, your own impulses. "If I'm going for this, I'm going to go for it. I'm not going to check that swing."

There's not space to be overly critical.

No, you move on. If you can't stand to listen to it, don't listen to it. It exists in the moment.

When recording you're trying to solve 'technical puzzles'. Which puzzle have you been focused on recently?

The music on the new record is a couple years old. I've been focused on bringing it to the stage. In the cycle of what I do, there's creation time, performance time, and they don't necessarily mix too much. There is a puzzle that I'm excited to be solving, but I can't name it. I know what it is, and I know where to find it, but I'm not close enough to solving it to speak it. It's about the lightness of feel in the rhythm. The best examples being in Salsa music, how Salsa music just floats, even though it has a heavy rhythm section. I'm trying to get to the root of it right now, but I'm nowhere near it.

Song structure takes shape when preparing for live performances?

That's true with a few exceptions, like the covers. On the new record, the two traditional songs, the melody exists, and I get to treat it a certain way, but there's walls around that. "The Crack Where the Light Gets In" asked me to consider: "How do I turn this riff into an actual song?"

Did something click that allowed you to get there?

I wanted to build it like a vocal arrangement. I was building it like some kind of transcendent, religious vocal arrangement with parts coming in, going up and up and up. I like how the piece came out, but I don't know that I reached where I hoped I could get to. Everything else is just pure improv.

Where/how do you keep track of your ideas?

I have about 200 clips of things on my phone. Sometimes I return to those, but they're never what I thought they were. I have found that good ideas repeat themselves.

If the idea is good enough, you'll remember it.

Yeah. It comes back. That assumes daily practice where I'm in a space where once a week I get time to play. There's a difference between rehearsing for a show or playing. I have to be in a certain playing practice that's daily for that to work. I have to be in conversation with that part of myself.

What does it look like when you are in that practice?

I have a set up at home. I spend a good part of most winters in Mexico City, and I have a space there that works in a similar way, but I don't have as much equipment. Usually just an acoustic guitar.

Do you set an agenda or pick a skillset to focus on?

If it's a skill set, it's not related to composing. It's related to the technical aspect of playing, like getting my thumb to be in a meter outside of two or four. I'm not necessarily building pieces around that. I'm just practicing. I'm a believer in technique and repetition, getting moves under your hands that you can use or abuse. I spent one Portland winter learning all of the Segovia scales, major and minor. I made a giant mural on my bedroom wall of the circle of fifths. I would play the scales backwards and forwards through the circle of fifths, all of them, every day, until they were just there. That's not a piece, that's not a song, but it's the technique embedded in those scales that frees you.

How do crowd size and venue impact your experience as a performer?

If it's 200 or under, I can really talk to them. You can get in conversation and have everyone be together. If it's bigger than that, 500 to a thousand or more, you can't talk, really. Everything has to be in one or two sentences and you have to play slower because the size of the rooms have sonics where a lot of the little or fast stuff gets lost. You have to adjust the technique for a larger room if you don't want it to get lost. Same goes for playing inside or outside. There's moves you can do. From an artistic standpoint, the best size rooms are those 300 ones where you can do every move. The audience is getting a mix of room sound and PA sound. They're getting the actual amp. The bouncing from the walls is not enough to affect the experience of the primary source. Everyone's close enough.

It's also fun to play in bigger rooms. It's this adrenaline rush. I was opening for some friends at the Fillmore on New Year's Eve five or six years ago. A thousand or 1500 cap. There's one song I do where there's a snippet of "I'll Fly Away" inside of it, and for whatever reason, the whole room just started singing the song. I was like, "Oh, my god." I've never inspired that before or since, and just kept going with that part. The whole room, the entire Fillmore auditorium was singing 'I'll Fly Away'. I had not prompted it. I felt like a giant wave surfer where you're like, "If I make a false move now, we are all going under." Things like that are possible in these rooms.

How has your relationship to touring changed over the years?

The first time I ever went on tour I was 26 and was like, "Wait a minute, you can travel and play music and get paid all at the same time? This is the fucking best." I was like, "This is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. How could I not do this?" I was already a road dog at that point. In an activist way, living on the road for years at that point. But then, it was like, "You can get paid for this? Jesus." That was enough for me at that point. I'm not that way anymore. The economics of being 26 are different from the economics of being where I am now.

It's complicated. Music Twitter, all the people saying it's not fair and this and that, I totally get that. It isn't fair, and also, life's not fair, but it's also a very First World, a market-based approach to music. It is a market. We engage in a marketplace, and if you're not getting a fair price for what you're bringing to market, then there's a problem either in what you're bringing or in the nature of the marketplace, maybe both. The idea that one could play music for a living, it's a pretty far-out-there idea to begin with.

I have a slightly different perspective than a lot of people. It's not that I disagree with them, because it's true. There's a broken system that we're involved in. People are making money. It's not the artists. This is true, and it's not fair. But no one is owed a living for their creative work. No one. If you bring work to the marketplace, you subject it to that marketplace, and I think that's not something people understand until they're farther down the road. Just because I love to do something does not mean the world owes me anything for that.

I'm noticing bands wanting to be on the road immediately rather than build locally.

There's a lot of ways to look at that. What if you're from a small place? When I first started touring, I was living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Playing once a week at the cowboy bar. That's cool, but you're not going to build a career on that. There's a big difference between an urban or a rural perspective. A huge difference. Different worlds. Everybody's path takes its own place, and communities are not necessarily geographically located now that we have the internet. What you're saying kind of gets to that question of what resources are available and what actions are possible within the base of those resources?

Social media provides a narrative that you should be great at something right away.

Yeah, and I'm a late bloomer. I did a lot of other things. The first solo guitar record I did came out when I was 40. I don't believe that only geniuses and young people get to do creative lives.

What does a successful collaboration look like?

It's that spirit of openness. A feeling like you can reach something that is out of reach on your own and that you're helping the other person reach something that is out of reach on their own. That you're creating a third thing made of the pieces of you and whoever else. That the sum of the parts is something that transcends each of the parts. Not that it's better or that it's more, but just that it's something that any one person couldn't get to on their own and that it's a satisfying conversation for everyone who's participating in it.

Did you have a visual of what being a full-time musician could look like growing up?

That's part of why I'm such a late bloomer. It's the logic of me being the age, gender and whatever else I am and being able to, by myself, get in front of people and play an electric guitar. The odds of that working are slim to none. I didn't have a lot of paths through those woods. There was a guitar player who, back when I was a teenager and a young adult, she's a session player in the Bay Area. Her name's Nina Gerber. I ended up taking lessons from her. She's the one who taught me how to improvise for the first time.

I grew up in a really small town. There wasn't a lot of music. Live music wasn't anything I can remember, beyond concerts in big places, but with peers or anything like that, it didn't exist. Somehow I became aware of her. She played with a lot of different people. Most notably, she was Kate Wolf's guitar player for a good chunk of her career. That was the first person I identified where I was like, "I want to know what that person knows."

Marisa Anderson Recommends:

listening to the radio

afternoon coffee

getting lost

Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City

The Music That Made New Orleans by Ned Sublette

Name

Marisa Anderson

Vocation

composer, guitarist, and multi-instrumentalist

□

Laurent Orseau