

On being inspired to write your first book



Writer Lesley Chow discusses finding her subject, wanting to change the musical canon, how she put her first book together, and why stumbling upon oddities is so special.

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As told to Matt Ford, 2475 words.

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In *You're History*, your forthcoming debut book, you write about 12 of the strangest women in popular music. Why these specific 12, like Kate Bush over Madonna, or Chaka Khan—the eldest artist you study—over Tina Turner?

It was less about music that I just enjoy and more about music that I've puzzled over, over the years. The way [the music] works mystified me. I had to sit down with it and listen to moments over and over again to work out how did that affect happen, why do we feel this explosive effect, or why does this seem to accelerate? Even when it isn't, why does it give the illusion of getting faster and more intense? Songs that are enigmatic to me, I would say that's the reason for choosing them. Enduring enigmas. I've been puzzling over this music since I was a teenager. So, I have plenty to write about as opposed to just a great song that's not mysterious to me.

Can you walk me through your writing process, from ideation to research to draft? Did you revel in nostalgia and dig through your CD or vinyl collection or spend countless hours on YouTube?

The majority of my writing is on film, but as time went on, I began to get more and more ideas about music. I started to write about soundtracks and, finally, it was like, "I really need to write on music. What form should that take?" I began taking heaps and heaps of notes in a rolling document or email about moments in songs that struck me as strange. And those started building up into dossiers on specific artists and songs and then, before I knew it, I had this plan for 10 to 12 women.

I only wanted to write on songs that I felt passionately about. Those songs I listened to and thought about quite obsessively, and I tried to express what it is about them that makes them enigmatic and enduring. And then, it looked like I was developing some sort of theory of pop, if you will, along with essays about women that illustrated those points about pop.

In your book, as well as in your journalistic and critical work, you often address how critics misunderstand popular music, especially by women of color. What are you hoping your work will do in the larger ecology of music criticism?

Sometimes when I ask friends, "What do you love about Nick Cave, what do you love about Bob Dylan?," they go, "Great lines, he comes up with such great, quotable lines." Well, what is it doing musically at the moment? Because we can all quote lines. My friends can quote them to me and they sound pretty natty but where is the force and charge behind the lines that is making them compelling? That to me is the real mystery and interest of music—how words and sounds are being worked with in ways that can often contest their literal meaning. And that's

what I find in these particular artists. I didn't initially think I wanted to set up choosing women or mostly women of color but those are the people whose work fascinated me the most.

I found it, well, confounding that so much of magazines and music websites today is made up of lists—the top 100 songs you need to hear, the top 100 albums you need to hear before you're dead—and we're hearing the same names again, again, and again and some of those names I greatly admire but you never hear, say, Neneh Cherry, someone who's an obvious innovator. You never see someone like that even in the top 10. Why do we keep hearing the same names again and again in the canon? Why do we always get rock songs, one hip-hop song, and Aretha Franklin? Let's look at music in terms of what makes it distinctively music and not just good writing. What's articulate on the page isn't the same as what transmits in a song.

You point out how "oohs," "aahs," and yelps are interesting or mysterious, all of these little nooks and crannies in music that we take for granted. What is the most valuable thing that you've learned from pop music in your writing career?

Absolute bursting joy, I would say! In Chaka Khan's "Ain't Nobody," that mounting breath that's described in the book. I think what I learned from pop is that bursting elation, [such as in] "Best of My Love" by The Emotions, that kind of sky high emotion.

What is it about that big burst, that sky-high energy, that is so compelling that makes you want to write about it?

It's the transformative effect on the body, something you can't deny. It's not like, "I think this is a well-written phrase, I think that's a good line," but before I can even think about it, my body is saying, "Yes, this is amazing." The sort of haptic effect of music. I would say in Chaka Khan, the way she sings a particular line can feel like a caress, like it's moving closer towards you. Why is that? So exploring the mystery of music rather than [casting disdain on music] that doesn't conform to ideals. When you're looking at the canon, there's a lot of head music in there. There's not a lot of body music in that I don't feel my hips moving when I'm looking down the list.

How are political revolutions or cultural resets most palpably sparked by pop songs? Not just by Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" or Beyonce's "Formation," but what's political about Rihanna's vengeful, no-nonsense "Bitch Better Have My Money" or the braggadocio of Nicki Minaj or Cardi B?

Well, Rihanna. Even though we know that she has amazing musical chops and can give it up when she needs to, I think it's quite an interesting decision for her, for the most part, to have a voice that seems a little disinterested, like "I'm in the middle of something else. I'm affectless." I'm friends with an amazing critic named Anwen Crawford and we're thinking about doing a podcast on this subject, which is about women who have that kind of Teflon or silicone in their voices. Rihanna's generally considered not to be a good singer. If you look throughout the press, people have used the term "lazy." Is she a karaoke artist? Is she just doing this in between fashion lines? People don't like it when a woman phones it in. They're quite uncomfortable with the nonchalance of her tone and maybe that's revolutionary in its own way. The way she's just sort of grunting, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," in "Rude Boy," and the fact that people are listening to that and that's normalized, even if "Rude Boy" isn't a critically acclaimed song. That's something.

People seem to want effort and conscious thinking, conscious craft in pop. Those are elements of pop but that's not the magic of pop or the uniqueness of it. And if music is thoughtfully created and you think this person is sincere but it does nothing for my body, what is there to say about your music? No one's looking at it in an essay format. That's not the kind of music I get the most out of, personally, music that does nothing for my body. And I'm struggling to decode what effect the sound has on my body. It's weird. It's maybe tacky, it's unpleasant. But it's memorable.

What's at risk of being lost when critics and the general public either miss or completely ignore these moments in a song?

For instance, you might know that it's really hard to transcribe dance. It's really hard to say, "Show me what you just did to show the effect of it." I think that's what's difficult with music, to describe the affect and the emotional aspect. And the best way I can think of doing that is through the sensations you have listening to it, and also the way that you're sort of echoing it in your mouth and in your mind.

You also have at the end of your book a list of some of those great songs with those "ooh's." Can you name one of those songs that does that work for you?

Look at Prince. For me, his most exciting songs are not so much "When Doves Cry" but the ones that are made up almost entirely of exclamations and extraordinarily precise ones. Erotic ones, pedantic ones. Repulsion, confusion. His work is full of those unusual effects and a lot of that is transmitted through the idiosyncrasies of his voice, the different registers he can go to. And there's something about an "ooh" that is really immediate in crystallizing that affect. I think in responding to any kind of artwork, the immediate response is really important, as well as the considered response.

Do you have any personal connection to any of these artists? Whose message really stood out to you and how has that musical memory carried you into adulthood?

I was really young when [Neneh Cherry's debut album] *Raw Like Sushi* came out and I would say that the panoply of voices in her work seemed like the norm, or the new normal to me. And the question is, why did music never pursue that stream? Artists today who are eclectic or self-consciously diverse, the way that she simply absorbs and starts ventriloquizing voices, the ease and naturalness with which she does it is pretty rare. So she's probably the one I'd identified with most first. Also, in Shakespeare's *Sister*, the way that the women there were sort of casually prepared to play the villain, to be artificial, synthetic. Again, that seemed like a new normal to me that hasn't really been the case [since then]. None of these artists have been as influential as I thought they would be or should be.

What do you think held back those artists that you just mentioned and why do you think their visceral, odd affects didn't carry over into today's music?

The fact that the oddness and the visceral affect were not things that were prized, that were seen as pleasing. Neneh Cherry's always had respect but her uniqueness was not seen as worthy of analysis in the same way as grunge rock was. And then, in the '90s, you could find reams of think pieces about grunge rock, and some on hip-hop, too, but there was nothing zoning in on what made her special—the sourness, the tinniness. True oddity is something you stumble upon. It's difficult to manufacture and it just wasn't something that was prized. Well into the '90s, I think the classical songwriting tradition was really dominant in music criticism. Now, we're seeing it veering more towards pop in a way that it wouldn't have in the '90s, but even so there doesn't seem to be much impetus to look at the strange and maybe off-putting moments in time.

You're also a writer on film. What about a song's message, whether it's staunchly political or playfully lascivious, is amplified in music videos and performance aesthetics?

Musicians are so compelled to be "on-brand" now, but I think music videos are increasingly less mysterious. They're more professionally edited and they're missing the serendipitous [quality]. But I would say that, for instance, Janet Jackson's video for "If"—do you recall it?—with all kinds of odd voyeurism and angles that really open up those secretive dimensions of the song. Neneh Cherry—the videos were raw and cheaply produced. The colors seem to screech on the screen but it's absolutely right for the music.

Do you go to concerts? Well, pre-pandemic.

I often went to them, yes. You remember that time now.

What is it about set design, choreography, costume changes, a shared experience, hearing an artist's voice live—all of these different elements brought together in a concert—that opens up a song or the life of an artist to

you in ways that you wouldn't get if you were just listening or dancing along at home?

I think the artists who have been most inspiring to me live are the ones who are great at creating a mood change. Instantly, you feel that something in the air is different from the moment the performance begins. It's a very different set of skills [as compared] to performing in a recording. I've seen some of these artists live, but I would say that, for instance, someone like Tricky. The moment he begins with the first chord, something has changed in the air. You're drawn into it together and you don't know how he's done it because he just played one chord but somehow something has definitely changed. Those are the most exciting artists to me live. And I would say Azealia Banks falls into that category as well. Nicki Minaj, absolutely, the set design is amazing. That incredible prismatic use of color. What color is Nicki Minaj? She's painted herself over so many times, it's really not evident anymore, and that's kind of exciting. What nationality is Nicki Minaj? When she's relaxed, she seems to slip into an English accent more than she does an American one or New York one. In her case, the use of costumes and props really feeds into her music, which is really hard to place.

Which of the 12 artists in your book have you seen live?

I've seen TLC, Neneh Cherry. Sadly, I haven't seen TLC with Lisa Lopes. But, in general, I would say, with the artists in the book, my most transformative experiences with them have been on record and not live. From where the song seems to be coming out of nowhere as opposed to where fans are calling out for it.

Do you listen to music on repeat? How does the song change for you or what work is being done when you listen to something on repeat?

I recently wrote an article on Róisín Murphy and her voice keeps on changing and lilting in very odd ways, and I find that I have to listen to it again and again to work out what's going on in her voice and why it has this particular magnetic effect on us.

Lesley Chow Recommends:

Genesis Owusu – *Smiling with No Teeth* (Performer/Album)

We Have Always Lived in the Castle by Shirley Jackson (Book)

The Makioka Sisters by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (Book)

Slightly Scarlet – Allan Dwan (Film)

The Kiss Before the Mirror – James Whale (Film)

Cry Danger– Robert Parrish (Film)

Emma Thompson, Isabella Rossellini (Actresses)

Name

Lesley Chow

Vocation

Writer

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