

On finding success on your own terms

Musician and writer Rita Indiana on multi-tasking, being grounded in your community, and creative work as a healing process.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2432 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Music](#), [Money](#), [Day jobs](#), [Independence](#), [Success](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

Where were you in your life in 2011 and 2012?

I was basically a little sick of the whole music thing, the music gigs basically. Because I liked creating music, writing it, and producing it. What I didn't like was the touring and the celebrity status in my country, the Dominican Republic, so I quit. And I thought it was going to be forever, so I went back to writing, which is my main thing, writing novels. And I got a job as a senior copywriter, which is something I did for a long time before I made music in the DR when I was still just writing books. So I got a job to support myself and to start working on the book that would become "[La Mucama de Omnicunlé](#)"

Were you fed up with the music industry or creatively exhausted?

I was fed up with different things, I just got tired of the whole celebrity status, people recognizing me everywhere, having no privacy whatsoever. And my kids were little and I didn't want to deal with the stuff that I was dealing with already. It was my choices that put me there. So that was another big reason for just going back to just writing and having a day job.

How did you develop your practice of writing?

I was always a storyteller. I think I got it in my genes because of my two grandmothers. I also think the Dominican people are very good storytellers. They're very funny. They're very creative with words, with the way they tell stuff with their bodies too. When I said "oh, I'm a writer," was when I was 14 and I started writing poems and rhyming and stuff in school. When I was a student, I used to do other people's sonnets and I was really good at it. And I've always been really fast with rhymes. I would do the homework for my classmates and have them pay me five pesos each for stuff like this. And then I realized I liked it a lot and I started doing my own things.

How does your process or practice of writing literature is different from your practice of writing music? Do they nurture or complement each other or how do they co-exist?

They definitely feed on each other. My new album, *Mandinga Times*, wouldn't be possible without me writing "[Tentacle](#)" and [La Mucama de Omnicunlé](#)", my two previous novels. They're both writing practices about writing, so you're exercising the same kind of muscles, but the difference is the time you spend on it. For me, the difference is in the time I spend on these two things, usually for a novel is a lot more time, and I have to think things a lot more. This happens, for example, with writing characters, I'm developing a character right now. And I think I've been developing that character for probably five, six, seven years just in my head, it's not

like I'm writing or even drawing or anything. It's just this person that I get used to, I'm feeding this box of who she is and where she's coming from. And then I change things. And so I've been living with this ghost in my head, since 2012, when I was in Miami. And I wrote two novels after that, and this is another character. So this is it, sometimes there's a bunch of people that are living with you, that you're creating for different books at the same time. So that doesn't happen with songs.

Now that we are talking about characters, can you walk us through your process of writing the main character of your novel "Papi"? This girl that is the protagonist and the narrator.

I was in Norway in 2002, and I watched the film Scarface, and I used to go to Miami to visit my dad when I was very little in the early '80s when Miami was the murder capital of the United States. And I didn't see any of that, but seeing the movie, I could recognize certain aesthetics, suits, cars, and places. And then that was the first motivation to write the book.

And it has some autobiographical aspects too, but the book is told from the point of view of a little girl. I didn't grow up with my dad. So to make up for that I used to tell these stories to my friends, of how rich my dad was and how many girlfriends he had. And so this voice of this little girl I took it and wrote a whole novel of this girl that is bragging about her dad, which is what the novel basically is. And that the voice is developed on that, a girl that's bragging to her friends about this dad that doesn't live with her.

What are your expectations or hopes when you release a novel versus when you release music?

I think with the music, I'm always expecting fast feedback. I'm writing the song and I'm thinking about it a little bit, how are people going to feel about this or what I want to do. The process of writing a novel is more of an experience of pleasure. So there's a big part of me that is not thinking about the reader when I'm writing. It's thinking more about the pleasure of writing, the pleasure of creating this work. Of course, I want people to read it, I wouldn't publish it if I didn't want that, but there's a big part of me that is not worrying about that, is more worried about letting me create this beautiful thing.

For me writing a novel is like a healing process, and writing music is more like a fun thing. Something that is done in the moment and that will allow me to see what people who hear it are going to feel and how I want to make people feel with this kind of sound. So it's different also in that sense, how you create it and what you expect others to get from that.

Can you elaborate a little bit on what you mean, that writing a novel is more about a healing process?

I always say that my novels are ahead of me. I express things and I crystallize ideas and things that I don't as a human being in my normal relationships. My novels teach me how I was feeling in the past and how I was articulating things and ideas that I wasn't ready to understand at that moment, but the novel did that.

And then a couple of years later, when I'm at another place emotionally or spiritually, I realize like, "Wow, I expressed an idea that I'm understanding now." I already expressed this five years ago, ago in a novel. And now I'm understanding what I was saying there.

And the other thing is of course when you're playing around with things that have happened to you, things that you've heard, and things that you've come up with and speculate about, it's like you're doing this magical thing too. You have a little bit of power, at least on the page, to decide what you want to happen. So I think that for me, writing gives you agency. A little control over a particular universe.

What about what you said that writing music is more about fun?

I mean fun in a more ephemeral sense. I make the songs really fast and usually produce them and record them really fast and I don't really overthink my music. It's a process that is not tedious or I don't have to be disciplined is it just comes out in a very organic and fast way.

Moving out to your new album *Mandinga Times* and circling back about developing characters, for this album you created an alter ego. Who is this character?

Well, Mandinga it's an ethnic group that came from Africa that arrived in the Americas as slaves, and it's one of the biggest groups that were brought here. And it's a word that means a lot of things in many places in Latin America. And there are speeches called Mandinga, towns, barrios, markets, places. And also it's a word that's been used usually to demonize certain marginalities like homosexuals or black people, also people who are supposed to be witches or that practice witchcraft. So that Mandinga in a way, she's like a non-binary monster. It's like a metaphor for the demonization of people of the periphery, immigrants, people from Latin American heritage, people from the LGBTQ community, or that are afro-descendant. So Mandinga is that, but she's a lot of other things. I think the monstrosity comes from a little bit of how scary queer people are to some people in the world. She's also a little bit of the ghost of patriarchy that lives in me and within all of us.

Your album *Mandinga Times* has been labeled as "a songbook for the end of the world." How did you feel during the process of creating and writing this album?

I've always been interested in apocalyptic ideas and from the Bible, from science fiction to the ideas that people have of how this would happen, and if it's happened before. It's something that interests me. I was still using the *Mandinga Times* thing from a kind of like a humorous side, but then in January we had all these earthquakes here, in Puerto Rico, and we haven't still recovered from Hurricane Maria in 2017. All these things have happened like a really bad economic crisis. And then the earthquake came and then the coronavirus hit and suddenly it wasn't as funny as when we started the project in October.

So it got more serious as we went on. And I wasn't expecting to finish the album in lockdown, which we did and to present it, to put it out and during the lockdown either. It's been tough for everybody, but what a better moment to put it out. It's been a little bit absurd at times, I think to be an artist at this moment in time. You think, oh no, what are priorities for people? Food and medicine and a house and all that. But it's the only thing I know how to do so I'm going to keep on doing it.

You experienced "success" with your album "El Juidero" in the sense that you were mentioning that it gave you fame, recognition, big reach, but somehow you were not comfortable and happy. How would you describe success in a way that you own it and that you feel not only comfortable but also proud of it?

Well, success is a very complicated concept, right? Because there's a biographical essay in The New Yorker that came out recently about my life. But I'm living a very normal lower-middle-class life. I'm broke most of the time, spending most of my money on my kids' education and just living a very normal life and struggling economically because I'm an independent artist. I'm not like a mainstream super pop star. I'm a writer of novels and I make albums that a few people listen to.

I feel successful because I have this community of listeners and readers that consume what I make in a very respectful way and who I consider smart people. And I share most of these people's values. But in another way, it's still tough. It's still tough to be an artist and to be compromised with the way you want to make your art and what you want to put out in the world and to make a living out of it.

You surround yourself with a talented community of creative people that work across different disciplines. For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?

I think my biggest resources are people. For my practice as a writer and storyteller, music, also composer, conductor, and all that, because I feed and my work feeds from their stories and who they are and what they've been, and who we've been as the human race in this earth. And the other is because you have to work with people anyways, even if I just wrote novels and didn't do music, I would still need someone to help me publish it or someone to look at my text and edit it a little bit or fix things, or just I'm always collaborating with people in their work or in mine and I think that's beautiful.

Is there anything that you wish somebody told you before you began making art and music or writing?

It would have been cool to have someone who could teach me about the business side of things, of publishing, of making music. Someone who had spelled out for me how things work. And I would have made smarter decisions on that side of everything.

Would you recommend for young musicians or writers to do that, to do some literacy?

Definitely. I think it's very important because you're going to get ripped off if you don't, that's what's going to happen. You've got to learn how things work, how people who are going to distribute or edit, or whatever your work is about. And this for all kinds of artists, not just literature and music.

When something doesn't work or flow properly, do you have a ritual or practice that centers you back and gives you the confidence to keep going?

This is going to sound really weird, but I pray the rosary every once in a while. I try to do it every day. I was raised a Catholic and I'm not a practicing Catholic, but there are certain things that work because I link these prayers to the energy of my grandmothers. And I feel like I get close to their spirits and who they were. And all the women on both sides of my family, and I kind of reach out to their energy through that. And it works. It gives me focus. It gives me strength. It grounds me.

Rita Indiana Recommends:

Books:

Paul B. Preciado's *An Apartment in Uranus*

The Unnatural History of the Sea by Callum M. Roberts

TV Shows:

Bloodline

Atlanta

Russian Doll

Name

Rita Indiana

Vocation

Writer, singer, songwriter, musician

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Eduardo Martinez