

On creativity as a path to resurrection



Musician Draco Rosa on learning from adversity and uncertainty, doing things for the right reasons, and always looking towards the light.

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As told to Camilo Garzón, 2059 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Adversity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#).

How do you think your creative process and songwriting have evolved throughout your career, from your time in the boy band Menudo to being a solo artist?

Well, you know, it's been interesting. There are certain things in my life that have led me to be more at peace with certain aspects of songwriting because of the silver lining in different situations.

One great example is years ago, in the early years after Menudo, I was going to sign a huge contract in L.A. and I ended up not signing it. People were so upset about it that it ended up in litigation and it resulted in me not being able to record in the U.S. for five years. My only move at the time was to go to Brazil to record, and the silver lining was that I learned so much being over there about songwriting. I learned that music is to be felt and not understood, and I learned that in my time in Rio de Janeiro. Y de la música de allá en particular, hay un hombre que se llama¹ Michael Sullivan. He was like the Latin Paul McCartney in Brazil in the late 80s, I was very lucky and fortunate to be there at that time.

So the songwriting process for me has been a tricky one. I'm a collaborator. I bring in essence, I bring in solid ideas, almost to the point of finishing them up. But as I became a producer one of the things I discovered along the way, again with the writing process, is that there's gotta be a leader. Otherwise, it gets so messy. And coming from Menudo and working with the group, I thought, "Well, maybe I should be with a group," but I realized that I had to roam alone for a while.

Songwriting has been a great way of collaborating and for me it's always been just such a beautiful way to express myself and the poetry that I've been able to consume throughout my life. It's so important. I thought about this on many days: that many of my family members told me, "Oh, that's all that you do, Draco, despertar con un librito de poemas, dando vueltas por ahí², what are you going to do? ¿Por qué tu no haces como fulana?" Siempre, la familia compararme con fulana o fulano.³ When I did Salsa, same thing, they thought "coño, pero por qué tu no vas a la escuela a estudiar salsa que tú eres un salsero."⁴

So people tell you, "you should be this, or that." But, you haven't really paid that much attention to them. You've decided to not do that and instead explore so many sonic landscapes and genres and arrangements. Why?

Because I just believe so much in being in the moment and the moment is so full of uncertainty all the time. The intensity of not knowing, the intensity of the unknown, the spontaneity that comes from just jumping in without having any rules, any way of doing things, makes me feel more comfortable. I think it would've been great for me to be in a jam band or something, you know?

I think I am happier working more spontaneously. I love writing songs. And every once in a while I love performing those songs. But for some reason when I was younger, I looked at music more like a painter, and I'd draw. And I don't draw like I used to. I thought that was amazing, too. But everyone paints and draws. You feed off of all these different things and there is no one way, no rhyme or reason for me. In reality most of the time there's nothing going on. Every once in while, you sit down and you seem to be prolific. But, you have a day or two of that. And it could be dead for three months, and I have embraced that. I've embraced that I could do other things, you know. I just feel like life is so brief.

I've known that since I was very young. I knew this. So people used to criticize me. My mom was the one who used to tell me, "Oh, you're so talented, you should go to Juilliard, you can do it, dah dah dah." I was like, "For sure, mama. I'm going to, I'm going to." And then life took over. Life took over and here we are today. She hasn't mentioned that for years. She's been very satisfied and she's proud of her son. But, everyone has a better plan for you, right?

Absolutely. And as you said, life is brief. You have experienced cancer and relapses and all these things that life threw at you. How do you think this has informed your work? How have you been able to persevere despite these adversities? What is it that pushes you forward?

It's an energy. There's triggers, I'm sure. Whether it's inspiration, there are certain things that I love to do alone. I love going to museums. I love to ride my motorcycle. I go to many spiritual places out of curiosity. I really don't follow anything specifically. A lot of it is just discovery. I'm lured by my gut. My gut says, "Do this," and I pay attention to that. All of a sudden I will have a thought and I stop what I'm doing and I either jot it down or I flat out stop everything I'm doing and seek out whatever it is. That thing, the fact that it landed in my mind, I ask: "Is there a message?"

In a sense, do you think that after all you've been through, your creative process, be it painting, composing, singing, dancing, writing a book about your diet, or growing coffee, make you feel resurrected because you've been able to still create these things?

Absolutely. I feel that... and I've had this conversation before. It's one that is a very personal one, and I had it at home after having a stem cell transplant. One of the things that the doctor mentioned to me and my wife was, "Hey, you potentially will need to break up, you may potentially not want to do music, you may potentially quit everything, go somewhere else to live."

I've had a lot of change. I have had a *rebirth*. And I still do music, thankfully. I love it. And I'm still married. But a lot has changed. My views on life have changed due to the extremes and one of the things that I've eliminated for the most part at this point are toxic people. And some of them are family members. So, I've disconnected for my own health. Because I do believe that it's not just like, "Let's go to the gym and stay healthy," it's also eating well and, you know, walks, biking, and just being out and about. It's also having your heart and mind in the right place, which is what I'm pursuing these days—having that semblance of serenity.

Is it hard? Having your heart and your mind in the right place in the music business?

Sometimes I feel I give that up in the music business. I find the music business to be cheap, to be built on ignorance, built on everything that music isn't. Music is so precious and you hope to contribute. But then again, one of the reasons I stopped producing, too, was because I kept running into people who wanted to be famous. Assumptions of fame, obviously thinking that music brings the money, and whatever else in their mind it brings. But, having come from Menudo, everything is the same, *las lágrimas siguen iguales, sin dinero, con mujeres, sin mujeres*.⁵

Like, I think it's ridiculous when people want to meet you and then decide if they're going to be down with your music. I remember growing up, I just *connected with music*. I wasn't connected with the people. In this realm that we live in today, it's almost like sometimes the characters are more interesting than their music. And when you look deep at what they call "interesting," it's just total chaos. Everything's absurd. It's a life with no morals.

So finding the right balance is tough. You could argue, "Are you clinically depressed?" Cuando te agarra la pena negra⁶, you don't know why it's there. Es preocupante⁷. But as I get older, that is one thing that I desperately try to keep in check and I'm not very successful at it in general. At times, por lo menos flotando estoy sin agua⁸. But I'm not drowning, so...

You're still floating and creating. And as you were saying, you've grown to learn to live with these curveballs, things like you breaking with people that were really close to you. That's very hard. And as you were also saying, it's a matter of what you've learned with life. It's not about being famous—it's about the message and the possibility of doing something for you and others.

Being of service is by far more satisfying than having a hit song. Especially after the bouts of cancer, something happened to me.

It's like the drudgery that you see out there, sometimes you don't even have to consume the news, it just stays in your face. I don't know if it's just here, in the United States. I don't know. But I have a tough time with these topics. Pero lo que pasa es que, claro, I had that renacimiento⁹, no? So it's tough to sit and stay quiet about it, and to maintain a business. People, claro, after work, lo que quieren es escuchar música.¹⁰ And I get the simplistic sort of "beats of the day." The very simplistic sort of lyrical content that folks are creating. And you could say, "Oh, art is in the eye of the beholder." Alright, fair enough. But, some of it is very questionable.

Through the creation of Mr. Blake, another stage name you've used and created different music with in the past, through your solo career, through Vagabundo, in so many different ways, you've managed to keep reinventing yourself. And as you were saying, you were being reborn in different ways. What would you say to someone who is an artist that is struggling to just keep going amidst the difficulties?

I wish I could celebrate myself by saying, "Oh yeah, I had the wisdom to see beyond." The fact is I did not. The fact is I unfortunately had to experience despair. I had to think and endure through terrible deaths in my mind and my soul. I've had thoughts of terrible things on my own. And at one point, I have blamed the sort of terrible thoughts that I've had back in the day into why I got sick, you know?

You can't change the world. You just can't communicate this sort of thing. This sort of thing you can't teach. You definitely gotta live it. I had to go through all these crazy crises and the sorrow. And I think that for any up-and-coming artists, that's what it is, right? I won a Grammy one year for Teatro, and somebody told me, "oye Draco, only the strong survive." And I remembered that after that, I started getting sick.

The best we can do is to try to find a little niche of like-minded folks, positivity, and stay in the dreamer's circle.

Translations:

1. And from musicians there, there's a guy called
2. Waking up with a poetry book, dawdling.
3. Why don't you do like Jane Doe over there? Always family comparing me with Jane or John Doe.
4. Fuck, but why don't you go to school and study salsa because you're a salsa man.
5. The tears are still the same, without money, with women, without women.
6. When melancholia gets at you.
7. It's worrisome.
8. At least floating without water.
9. But what happens is that, of course, I had that rebirth.
10. Of course, after work, what they want is to just listen to music.

Draco Rosa recommends:

Zygmunt Bauman's reflections on happiness

DUCATI (Motorcycle)
Transhumanism
Stem cells
Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*
Divided by 13, guitar amplification

Name

Draco Rosa

Vocation

Singer, Songwriter, Producer, Composer, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist

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Courtesy of the Artist