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As told to Emma Bowers, 2085 words.

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On the importance of being present

Musician Erin Rae discusses overcoming negative thoughts, practicing meditation, and doing the things that make you feel good.

I wanted to talk about nostalgia. You're often pinned as this kind of Laurel Canyon-y, '60s, singer songwriter. I think nostalgia can be a cool lens on genre, but I wonder how it plays out in your life or how it's affected you consciously in your music?

I feel as I'm getting older, my relationship to nostalgia is changing. I don't feel it as heavily as I did for a long time. I'm enjoying the present moment more. I think for a while I was experiencing a lot of clinging towards the past, wishing I could have certain experiences again or a certain kind of family life. It's evolved and then resettled in this really nice way.

My parents split when I was 18, I think that helped fuel a lot of it. There's a book called [The Fantasy Bond](#) by Robert Firestone, he's a Ph.D. researcher on family dynamics and relational attachment. He explains how when there's a lack of a strong bond, there's still the necessity to bond for survival, so the brain will kind of fill in the gaps. I think nostalgia in my writing, and at different times has served as that gap feeling, especially with my earlier records.

I'm realizing that part of the nostalgia we're talking about is the aesthetic of the throwback genre. I think a similar feeling could be applied, imagining a different time. The music from that era feels very warm and expansive to, and all the tales that they tell around that era in Laurel Canyon, you kind of picture what it might have been to be in that time and what it would've been like to experience it.

You talked in an interview about a certain "glowy feeling" you use to describe a specific sensation that comes from the distillation of human experience in a certain setting or in a nice moment. You describe it as being a place where your songwriting comes from, and that it's this space of embodiment and inspiration. If I'm describing this right, how do you nurture and cultivate that space? Is it a place that you feel you can get to easily? Has that come with time or different practices?

I think I can't access it as easily now. Actually as I say that, I'm realizing that's maybe not true. It requires me making time to set aside to just play. It's almost like meditation. My dad actually has used this metaphor in talking to me about playing shows.

I'll be like, "Well, you know that one wasn't great, that one we weren't in the flow, but this other one was great," and my dad will say "That's meditation. Every time you sit down to meditate, you're not immediately going to access nirvana. You're not going to immediately fall into no thought and you may not even get there every time you go to do it, but the practice of going and regularly doing it increases the odds that you will experience that peaceful feeling."

I think there's circumstantial things outside of my control, feelings, what's going on in life...all of that. Then there's this question of how present I'm willing to be and how present I've been willing to be for a stretch of time. It all factors into how easily I can access that flow place of like, "Oh, I feel very connected to what I'm singing about, it feels resonant. It feels like it could be true to not just me."

So within this metaphor, do you sit down to meditate now?

I keep having the intentions to, and then it's "Oh, I've got to leave this weekend. I'm going on a writing trip." It's always been the best I have felt are the times where I'm able to show up for it though. It's

kind of just going to the gym. You've got to stay in the habit of it.

What is your experience having grace with yourself when you, rolling with this metaphor still, when you like, can't sit down and meditate.

I think I do have some grace. It's not like there's a voice in my head saying "You're horrible," but there are thoughts that pop in that say "Oh, you must not care about this if you're not doing it." Having those critical thoughts isn't compulsive for me, it's more of a reminder that this thing that I'm avoiding is something that's important to me. It's something that brings me esteem and I feel better when I do it.

I feel a healthy sense of pride if I'm working at it, which I think that's helpful. I also don't have a problem relaxing. I do that quite well, so it's helpful when a little bit of discomfort comes up and I get that nudge from that inner voice that says "Hey, you haven't been doing this. You haven't been doing these things that make you feel good, that are important to you in this lifetime."

That sounds really healthy. Instead of an inner critic, noticing when you're misaligned with what's important to you.

When the mean thoughts come I can take it either way. I can go down the critical road and beat myself up or I can see it as an indicator or a symptom that something's off.

What's something that surprised you about how your career has unfolded?

I mean, the whole thing. I think that it's been a longer, slower process. Circling back to the concept of fantasy, I think about when I was starting out and imagining what things would be like and feel like versus what they actually feel when you get there.

I have a memory of seeing the Swell Season at the Ryman. I was such a huge fan and I love *Once*. Also, my parents played music together and sang together so it all felt really familiar and special. I think similar to nostalgia is kind of imagining what it would feel to be them, and to be doing what they were doing. Looking back on this memory I realize that feelings that I was having as an audience member and my idea of what they were experiencing is totally different than what it feels to be on stage for me. That doesn't mean that I'm not doing it right or something. It's just like, I can't know what another person feels like. They put on a great show, but they could have been hungover or something.

Meaning that the things that you expected to feel the best aren't quite as fulfilling as you expected?

I've learned that for each thing that I'm doing it's really just about being present to that specific experience so that when I hit a high point it's not like, "Oh, I achieved this new thing," and then my baseline reality is to feel the high from that all the time. There are, of course, tons of moments of gratitude that are truly surreal like, "Whoa, I can't believe this is...I dreamed about doing this, singing at the Ryman. And now I've gotten to do that." But most of the time I'm really just trying to view each thing as a unique experience and be present for it.

Yeah, maybe that's the thing. That's the surprise. I thought that I would be able to sort of guess what it was going to feel like to do different things. You just can't.

Do you feel those moments of gratitude are what gives you the energy to keep going? Because if you keep having overwhelming exciting experiences and your dreams come true, and you can't ever stop to take a second to let it distill.

So much of traveling and touring can be so exhausting, but there's a romanticism to the certain kind of tiredness and the schedule of getting to the hotel at midnight and waking up early. Being exhausted, but getting coffee and being in the van all day, going to sound check, and then you do it all again.

A couple years ago I was reading Questlove's book, *Creative Quest*, and in it he talks about these mini meditations that he does, where if he's sort of frazzled or he's at the drum set on stage for a performance, he'll take a moment to center himself, closing his eyes, a little gentle reset.

I think what I do is like that. We opened for Lord Huron at Red Rocks in June, and the year before we had gotten to open for Trampled by Turtles there for two nights, so it got to be where I felt fairly comfortable being there. Then I had this moment—I was packing all my stuff up and looking at that specific view of the green room. It hit me that I should just take it in for a second because I thought, "I don't know if, or when I'll be back here." There's just so many unknowns. And I thought, "This is really cool, that I got to be here." It's about taking in those moments, and then leaving and moving forward.

How is being a working musician working for you these days? How do you feel about it?

Well, I definitely feel grateful to get to it—to get to go on tour and open for people and to have people supporting the work that I'm doing, people in my corner.

I also feel I still have a lot of questions about how it all works. Just learning more and more about how it makes sense actually as a job. Even when things are going well, I'm still thinking "Does this make sense?"

As in, financially?

It just takes a really long time. Even when things are building and going well, there's still quite a ways to go before you're in a comfortable and livable situation. I feel so supported and so lucky to get to make records and tour, so now it's kind of an experience of setting my sights on new goals, more logistical things. I think it's an age thing too, of just being like, "Okay, I'm officially a grown-up now. I'm taking the reins and wanting to make plans for living."

At the same time, I'm so often having a really great time on tours where it just barely works out. To me it's obviously not about the money, but it does take money to live and to fund projects that you want to fully realize. So I feel it's just learning, learning process.

What kind of things nurture that process of acceptance-of just being like, "All right, I'm doing this. I'm getting somewhere, but it's hard." What do you lean on? What bolsters you?

I think seeing how it's unfolded for peers, or people I have opened for, or looked up to, like my friend Mike of Hiss Golden Messenger. Over time he's built the incredible fan base that he has now and continued to refine his voice and his whole thing, he just gets better and better. That's something that really inspires me because it counters the idea that it should be this flash in the pan thing of just like, "boom." Overnight success.

Just knowing that there's more time helps me. There's always more time, you know? So I'll just keep creating with people and just playing music and remembering "Oh yeah, there's nothing better than singing harmony." In a way it's also inspiring to begin to understand more and more about what goes on behind the scenes and the business side of things.

There was a period of time where that felt really intimidating to me. Not that I wasn't able to access it, but that my brain wouldn't latch on well or for some reason it was difficult to be enthusiastic about learning what is required for continued growth.

Now I'm finding that it works much better in smaller chunks-like goal setting. I can seek baby steps to attain that next goal, and that's energizing to me because I can actually start to imagine and realistically see how things can grow.

More data for the dream-making.

Yes!

Erin Rae Recommends:

Nature, especially swimming and hiking

Hearing other people sing and singing with people

Wim Wenders films

Free-writing and morning pages

Going to estate sales, playing with other mediums like sewing or photography


Name
Erin Rae

Vocation
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Fact

Brianna Fish

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