

On working at your own pace



Musician Mia Doi Todd discusses the big responsibility of being a musician, accepting your creations, finding truth in art, and being your own muse.

April 30, 2021 -

As told to René Kladzyk, 2690 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#).

Let's start at the very beginning. Can you tell me about the relationship that you had with music as a child?

Neither of my parents were particularly musical. But I ended up going to a Christian school and music was a huge part of our education. It was at this very beautiful church in downtown LA, the First Congregational Church.

My favorite part of the week were our music classes. We had a music teacher named Mrs. Mesa, who had this huge curvy hair and she played a nylon-stringed guitar. It was an hour, maybe three times a week. Then on Wednesdays, our choir would sing for the whole church service. But also when I was a teenager, my next door neighbor was an opera singer, and he gave me private voice lessons in his living room. He was an old school Hollywood voice coach, [Hamilton Williams](#). He was such a gorgeous gentleman. He taught me an Italian operatic vocal technique. I'm not an opera singer, but that classical training is kind of at the core of my vocal style.

I was born in LA, spent all my childhood here. When we were 16, there was the indie rock movement going on. I started going out to indie rock shows, like at [Jabberjaw](#), and got acquainted with people writing their own music. I had been really into Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen. So I started writing songs, and I found my path very early on. My first record, I recorded in 1996. That's 25 years ago, so I've been doing this thing for 25 years now.

It's interesting that you mentioned Joni Mitchell- listening to your vocal delivery, you mentioned the classical training influence on it. But I also hear the influence of the folk singer lineage in your approach.

Definitely. Joni Mitchell records, I listened to them so much. Through her, I absorbed what it would be like to be a woman and experience life. She had a huge impact on me. I got to meet her one time.

Oh my gosh.

She was having a Christmas party, and a mutual friend invited me. It turned out to be a very small gathering, and my friend was like, "Joni, this is Mia. She's a singer/songwriter, you should really hear her music." And Joni said, "How do I hear your music?" And I was like, "Well I brought you a CD." She says, "Oh great, give it to me, I'll put it on." So she put it on. Which is not what I was hoping for. We played pool and listened to my record. I was just mortified. I would have died at that moment. That was my record [GEA](#) that we listened to. It just sounded awful to me compared to her music.

But you have to accept your own creations. Having made so many records, I cringe at some early work, but you just have to live with it. It was a path all along, one thing leads to another. But yeah, (Joni Mitchell) had that folk singing style, definitely.

I also really relate to Violeta Parra, Mercedes Sosa, Miriam Makeba—international folk music, women singing in a folkloric way.

A side note in terms of the international influence on your music, is the person who played on your record whose last name is Nascimento related to Milton Nascimento?

He's not, no, but Fabiano (do Nascimento) and I, we made a whole album of Brazilian covers together, it's called Floresta. We recorded it in São Paulo at my friend's beautiful studio. I've definitely done my investigation of Brazilian music, as a *gringa*. I don't aspire to be authentic or anything. But I love all those songs. Milton actually is the songwriter of Brazil that I really identify so much with. Milton's voice, to me, it's like the voice of nature. Just beyond. It's really the essence of humanity, too. I aspire to be like that.

I've been listening to a lot of Brazilian music lately, especially that Milton Nascimento album Clube de Esquina. I can hear that influence in your songs, and the thing that I love about that music is it puts me in the best state of mind. I feel that with your music, too. I've been listening to your new album Music Life a lot in the morning: in the shower, when I'm making coffee or doing the dishes.

It just really is very uplifting. Is that a deliberate intention you have as a songwriter, in terms of the energies you want to cultivate in the listener?

Definitely, that's the power of music. As a musician, you have this big responsibility. You can really shape mood and experience. It's important to put out good energy. My early records, there was a lot of melancholic songwriting—part of just going through the travails of one's youth. When I got to my album Cosmic Ocean Ship, I decided I wasn't going to make another sad record. I would rather not make any more records than make another sad record. That one, I intentionally made it as uplifting and joyful for myself and for the listener as I could.

With this (new album), this is 10 years later. In the course of that, I had a daughter and my life changed so drastically. I had to process all that. I allowed myself to delve back into the depths of grief. It didn't have to be a happy record, but just that sort of honesty, I think it gets to the heart of the human experience. It opens up this vista of human emotion for the listener to experience and go through their own process. It's really trying to be the voice of the people, trying to sing about human experience and in those things, it can uplift people.

Something that's really cool about this album is how much it uses archetypal framings in order to transform your perspective, shift your lens.

Exactly. I always try to work on this macroscopic level. But also on the microscopic level, because that's how we experience life, and that's the key to experiencing a more global vision of things. I was dealing with these mythological things on this record. The artwork, I drew it myself. And for the CD and vinyl it's quite elaborate. It's like Greek vase paintings.

I was referencing these archetypes in the album, and the artwork is like a roadmap towards that. But my feeling, going for these platonic ideals of what is music? Like in Greek, the Greek experience of music and dance was very much related to religion and the spiritual life. It's how you communed with the Gods and transformed into them. That's a similar thing to Japanese Noh, the actors become the gods and the characters that they are portraying. When they go onto the stage, they are transformed into those characters. I really relate to that, music being part of the spiritual life. Talking to the gods and pulling these ideals out of the air—how the transmission of knowledge is kind of mysterious.

It changed in Roman times and became more entertainment. I don't really think of my music as entertainment. It's more aspiring to that old, more Greek ideal of communing with the gods.

These songs deal with this mythological aspect. The mundane life that we lead every day: driving in our cars, talking on our phones, it can really suck the juice out of life. I like to think of things operating on this

mythological scale also. It gives more richness to life. There's one song, "Take Me to the Mountain," that obscurely references the Oracle of Delphi. That's the most Greek mythological reference in the album. On "My Fisherman," I'm singing from the perspective of the mermaid Yemaya, who is the goddess of the Yoruba religion.

It's also an analogy for the musician's life. Because the fisherman, he's always chasing his muse, this mermaid goddess that sings to him and brings the fish to him, and this is how he feeds his family. But it's also what takes him away from his family and eventually, he goes to the bottom of the sea. This fisherman song is a mythological analogy for chasing the muse and the artist's dilemma of balancing the creative life with the mundane.

It reminded me of The Penelopiad, a Margaret Atwood book retelling the Odyssey but from the perspective of Odysseus's wife who stays home. A lot of these epic stories and mythic stories are often told from a very masculine perspective. I enjoyed in that song how feminine the perspective is.

So much of the work I have done as a songwriter is from the woman's perspective. Like Joni Mitchell, she fought such a hard fight in those days. I think she's come up and she's now appreciated. But she really felt so unappreciated for a long time. Being strong and putting forth my female perspective over and over again, I think it's been important.

The one thing about that song, "My Fisherman," to be the muse—as a female artist I've often felt I need to be both the muse and the artist, you know? There's a double edged sword with things that way.

But it doubled the benefit, also. I'm glad to be a woman, for sure. Because it's all in me, it goes back to old things of men feeling very diminished by women's creativity. We're still, thousands of years later, recovering from all that. But in songwriting, I just try to be strong.

I'd love to talk a little bit more about being a woman in the music industry. I don't want to make too many assumptions about you, but from an outside perspective, it seems like you have been able to do that rare thing of building a long-term, sustainable career in music with a high degree of independence. You have your own imprint to release your music, you're a producer, you're part of the team behind Zebulon. Can you talk about what being sustainable means to you in the context of a music career?

Yes, I started my own label in 2001. I came to the conclusion right out of the gate, the way that the music business was working, I wasn't going to be able to release my albums when I wanted to. (Labels) would want me to wait, so I started my label just so I could put out the music the way I wanted to.

But there's definitely some challenges to that. Like booking agents don't really want to work with you if you have your own label. They want you to be on a reputable indie label where they know there's an office of people promoting your album, getting it in all the right magazines. There's trade-offs. But for me, in my little sub-genre, it was very practical to have my own label. I found working partners—there's an artist management company in New York called Virtual Label that helps manage my imprint. They help me with the manufacturing, and they have good distribution.

Overall, I think it's enabled me to have this long career—25 years is pretty good in music today. I felt very early on that I needed to have a lot of control in order to express myself. The world felt very oppressive, in many different ways. I needed that personal space to find my own voice.

If you had a fairy godmother who told you useful tidbits about the music industry 25 years ago, what do you wish she would've said?

Advice I would give to myself and that I would give to my daughter, is to have confidence in yourself. I could've been more confident and not fallen prey to judging myself by the lens of the world. I would've told myself, "You're on a good path, just be more confident." That's very simple advice.

That's very simple advice, but it's also really hard.

Self consciousness can be a hurdle that you just cannot overcome. But trying to be true to your own voice and your own vision, and respectful of yourself, that's important stuff.

Daniel Ek, the CEO of Spotify said that it's not enough for artists to do a new release every three or four years, they have to be engaging frequently with their audience in order to have success. You took eight years working on this new album—can you speak to the benefits of taking your time with a release and not falling subject to that industry pressure to have constant output?

I think this album benefited from the time that it took. I'm on my own timeline, you know? I've got other things going on that take precedence these days. My family life is my priority. All that stuff, you take it with a grain of salt. I'm interested in making great art. I'm much more about substance than style. Things that are just image and flashiness, they just don't have much sustainability to me.

To me, quality and truth in art are sustainable and valuable. I'm not so concerned with how many subscribers I have. It doesn't eat at the core of me. That's some of that self consciousness that we were talking about, just being true to yourself. If you want to be a pop star, then you have to go in a certain direction. But in me, I'm on my own particular path, and I aspire to be like those singers that are singing until they are really old and just have a lifetime of work. I'm not too concerned with the timeline of things now.

How has your relationship to music changed since becoming a mother?

I used to have so much freedom. I could work at my own leisurely pace. I've found with motherhood, I'm much more efficient in some ways. Like when I have half an hour to work on my own, I gobble it up and I'm able to just channel the heavens more deeply because I only have that amount of time. I'm much more practical.

In the song "Music Life," I talk about some friends who passed away. Music life, people move very quickly, live life to the fullest, you know? I did that. I had so much experience and felt so much and I'm grateful for all those experiences. But I made a transition to being a parent and wanting to live as long as I can to take good care of my family. Balancing creative life and motherhood, that was a big challenge. A lot of that struggle in myself made it into this record. I think that motherhood has just made me richer and deeper in my emotional life, and in my understanding of human experience. I bring that to the music. So that just makes the music better.

It seems like motherhood also complicates that dilemma you were talking about, in terms of women musicians being both the muse and the artist perceiving the muse?

Oh yeah, I've moved onto the next archetype. I'm a mother now. The romantic maiden, I've left that behind. I have all those memories. I have all this experience to call on. But I've moved into the next archetype and I have accepted that in myself. I'm not to the crone yet. I'm in the motherhood phase. It's a great place to be. I think this is the richest time of life, where you're giving. You're the giver. I'm glad to have the experience. And to bring that to music, I think is good.

Mia Doi Todd Recommends:

Korg SV2 keyboard

Temples of Mount Kurama outside Kyoto, birthplace of Reiki

Retusa: Santuario de Mariposas (Tokonoma Records) — new album by Luis Pérez Ixoneztli

Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa (book)

Cook's Illustrated (cookbook, all the basics and then some)

Name

Mia Doi Todd

Vocation

Musician

□

Azul Amaral