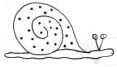




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November 17, 2021 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3953 words.

Tags: Music, Magic, Poetry, Inspiration, Focus, Success, Time management, Promotion, Multi-tasking.

On what you can learn from solitude

Musician Nandi Rose (aka Half Walf) on staying motivated when isolation has no clear ending, rebuilding through subtraction, creating new rituals, and gaining wisdom from deer flies.

Your most recent album, *The Caretaker*, explores ideas of solitude and isolation. It was composed and recorded long before quarantine started, but it was released in the midst of it. How do the ideas on the album feel the same, or different, to you in light of that shifted context?

Yeah, I obviously had no idea that I was going to be releasing this record in the midst of a global pandemic. I was saying to a friend the other day that there should be something in releasing a record about isolation *in isolation* that makes it feel like a closed circuit, kind of coming full circle. But instead, it's like this unanswered question that I have now because I was expecting to be touring this album and bringing these songs from isolation to a place of communion, and instead that isn't able to happen.

It's honestly been a hard thing for me to grapple with. I had taken a year off from touring to focus on writing and recording, and I had been searching for more time and space in my life. We'd moved to upstate New York. I had been craving more space, more time to be writing and be back in nature. And I got what I wanted. I got this amazing experience of taking time off the road and doing music full time and getting to go really low and slow and quiet with the process.

But while I was in that year of writing, working on *The Caretaker*, I realized I'd almost gotten too much of what I wanted. The pendulum had swung a little bit too far, and that when this idea of a Caretaker, as a character, came about. She got what she wanted by taking care of this estate and living in this amazingly beautiful place, but is actually experiencing a really heightened sense of isolation and looking back on all her relationships and missing human contact. I very much found myself in that place of realizing I needed the necessary resistance of other people in order to define what my alone time was and to make it more enriching. It needed that counterweight to make the alone time and solitude have more definition and more weight and more meaning. When it's just an open expanse with nothing on the other side of it, it loses that definition. It loses that focus.

That was something I was starting to think a lot about towards the end of my time working on *The Caretaker*, needing this friction of my experiences in relationships with other people to generate a lot of energy and a forward motion in my life. So, yeah, these were all things I was already thinking about, and then was really gearing up to reenter the world, in a way, by getting a new band together and going back on the road and leaving my home for stretches of time. Obviously that didn't happen. So I'm back grappling with some of those same feelings.

But now it's interesting because now everybody's in that place. At least with everyone experiencing the sense of isolation, everyone's also reaching out. We're all preoccupied with thoughts of finding ways to

stay connected, whereas before I felt like everyone was going about their lives, and I was in a place of stasis. But now we're in collective stasis. So there's at least some feeling of relief there.

You signed to a bigger label to release *The Caretaker*. A large tour had been announced. There was a lot of momentum—and then everything in the industry ground to a halt. I feel like when quarantine first started, people were treading water a bit because nobody knew how long it would last, and maybe didn't feel the need to figure out how to navigate it. Now that it's gone on so much longer, people have learned how to move through it a bit. Since you'd already been isolated, had you already developed tools to cope?

I think there was part of me that thought I was going to be better at handling it because it was like, "This is actually the shape that my life has taken in the last year, anyway, so I have developed tools for creating structure in my days and finding ways to carve out pockets of meaning in the great swaths of time."

I think that actually made it even harder because I thought I was going to be better at it than I actually was. It's been really hard. I've been trying to figure out why exactly that is. I think part of it is what you said. There was this momentum and this hope that this would be the next big push in my career, and part of it is just recognizing that I really need goals to work towards. When you don't have this definition on the other side of the great expanse, it's really hard to stay motivated and keep that sense of momentum in your own life. The first few weeks of this was a time of having to reconfigure our ways of being without these future goals and these plans and these events that define our more unstructured time.

A big thing for me that's been really exciting, though: I have a music room in my house. When I was writing *The Caretaker*, I wrote it all in this room. It's a really tiny room. You can't even fit a bed in the room, so it's really just the perfect nook for writing music.

I had this room filled with tokens from friends, little gifts that people had given me and photographs and memories, mementos—floor to ceiling, really packed into this room, all of this prized, cherished treasure. It was kind of cluttered, but in a way that I really needed at that time, because I was feeling so removed from the world. It was so comforting to walk into this room and feel like I could draw energy from all of those parts of my life. That really served me working on that record, but when this happened, I was like, "So what am I going to do now? I guess I'm going to work on my next record." And I came into this room.

Honestly, I couldn't enter this room at first, for the first couple weeks. I felt this room that had so supported me as an artist, it just felt ill-equipped for this new time. Have you seen that Rick Rubin documentary called *Shangri-La*? I just watched it, and it was really inspiring. His whole thing at his studio, Shangri-La, in Malibu, is that he has all white walls and no artwork and creates this empty vessel for artists to come into and fill with their ideas. I really liked that austerity, so I decided to empty out my room, paint everything white, and rebuild it from this place of absence.



before



after

That's something I'm thinking about. Right now, it feels like removal has taken on a new importance: I have to take things away in order to rebuild them. Just on a grand scale, we're all having to figure out how to navigate a totally new world. So, on a small scale, rebuilding this room, this sanctuary, from a place of newness has been really powerful for me. So now I have this new big, white desk, and my voice is echoing around the room in a new way because there's nothing absorbing the sound. I'll have to get some sound panels in here.

But, yeah, I think we've had so much control taken away from us, and this is a way for me to feel like I'm in control of building this space the way that I need to and want to right now. It's very specific to this time in my life.

It's always difficult when trusted rituals or spaces don't work anymore, and you have to come up with new approaches to creative work. I like that you're beginning from a place of removal. Just clearing out the entire space and starting over.

Yeah. I've had some really frustrating days where I've tried all my old tricks, and nothing works. Some of the old activities work, but I try to rotate creative outlets: reading, bird-watching, going for walks, cooking. There have been some days, though, where none of that has worked.

Something that I've revisited during this time is writing poetry, which I used to do a lot as a kid. I remember when I was in third grade, people would be like, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I went, "A poet." So I guess I got close to it being a songwriter. But I haven't really been writing music. I'm redoing my music room to facilitate my music-making again because I just have not felt musically inspired. But I have been writing poetry, and I guess that's another sense of removal, just getting down to the bare bones of expression. I think that'll help me find my way back to writing music, just getting back down to the essence.

There are so many ways to view quarantine. I've been trying to focus on it as a time that's forced me to slow down, and to notice things like birds or bugs or stars at night. Often, when an artist releases an album, and that album gets great reviews, they end up endlessly on the road, etc. There's a bigger structure around what they started out loving to do, and now they don't have as much time as they did to just focus on that thing. So, in a silver lining way, you're also having this best of both worlds scenario where you can be reflective and think about the poetry and the things that first got you into making art, and then, eventually, go on the tour when you have all this new information about yourself.

Yeah, I think so. It kind of gets back at that removal idea as well. Taking away this other aspect of this career has also really made me think about... I'm sure we will get back to touring. But what if this was my life? What if this was it? I've had to really calm myself down and remind myself in my more anxious moments that I love this. The fact that it's been foisted upon us, we can sometimes resent it. But I think if this wasn't forced upon me, I would choose this life.

For a lot of people, this has been a reset. It depends on your situation and how you're able to react, but for me, it's felt very elemental—to return to this small core of me, my wife, my kids, and just spending so much time with these people who, at the end of the day, mean more than anything else to me.

I love the word "elemental." I think there is something to that, about just reminding, on a really basic human level, reminding ourselves of what's important. It's easy to think that what's important is getting

this Instagram post up or playing this show. But having this slower pace, it brings everything back to its roots. I was saying that to Zack when we were on a walk the other day, "I forgot how much life it gives me to just walk in the woods. I did this all the time as a kid, and it's such a potent reminder of our most basic desires and needs."

As quarantine has continued, have you found other ways to cope and to keep going?

Early on, I had a whole list of projects and activities to take on as ways to cope and fill the time. But I've found that almost the opposite approach has been better for me. "Doubling down" is the phrase that keeps coming to my head. I think that means going deeper into a few things that give me meaning, like bird-watching and poetry, and also being more patient in general. Not restlessly flitting between things, but being more conscious and deliberate about where I put my energy.

I also just learned that deer flies are attracted to movement, and that has felt like a good metaphor for someone like me who is used to being busy and on the go. Stay still, don't get bitten. I'm learning more about birds [through bird watching], and now I'm volunteering with a local land conservancy. And I'm continuing to sort of prod at the corners of my creativity, probing for new life. I just did a project where I wrote a song a day for a week. The idea was to focus on curiosity over judgement. In practice, that was so much harder than I thought. I didn't really write anything I loved until the last day. I just felt like I had so little to give, so little to say, which was surprising and disappointing since I haven't been writing much these last many months. I thought there was going to be a flood stored up in there. But I probably dislodged some stuff I don't even realize yet.

I've also been thinking a lot about magic lately, its presence in nature and in my life in general. I don't really believe in god, but I do believe in magic. And belief in itself is its own kind of magic. There's a line in a song on my new album that goes, "I believe in something more than what's in front of me," and that has become a big mantra through everything. Including the mass movement and awakening we're in regarding racial justice. Like, we have to be able to envision and dream up a world that's free of these deep, painful stratifications that oppress so many people at the hands of capitalism. We have to believe in something more than what we can see or what we've been told to expect.

A lot of what we're talking about is refamiliarization but also defamiliarization. I'm curious about the specifics, for you, of writing a song. Do you have creative habits you have to fight against, things that you find yourself returning to, or comfort zones where you're like, "Oh, no. I'm doing this thing again," or, "This sounds like this other thing I did"?

Oh, gosh, all the time. I did a livestream yesterday afternoon, and I was preparing for it. I've been going back into my repertoire over the last eight years and playing some older songs, too. I was so struck by how similar thematically my old songs are. I would use the same words: "dreams," "ocean," and "water." Scenes just kept coming up. At first, I felt kind of weird about it, like, "Wow, I thought I was growing and evolving, and I'm actually just the same as I ever was." But then I realized, well, we all have our stories that we tell and the structures and ideas that we gravitate towards. Maybe there's something kind of comforting about that, actually, that that thread is following me through my life.

But in terms of when I'm writing and things I try not to do—I have such a natural impulse to create dense arrangements and a lot of sounds and a lot of textures. Every record, I'm fighting to write more minimally and say as much as I possibly can say with as few elements. I'll listen to other music I love, and there's three sounds. Like Frank Ocean. How the hell does he do that? There's like two drum sounds, and it's perfect. Actually, when I finished *The Caretaker*, I stepped back from it and looked at this thing I made, and I was honestly horrified that it's so dense. I was like, "Oh, no. I didn't need to do that."

But I think that comes from this impulse of wanting to create this really vivid, highly textured world. It's also just so fun when you're making something to add a little bit more color and see it grow and fill in all the lines. So I'm not saying it's necessarily a bad thing. But it is something I'm thinking about with each project that I work on. Like, "Okay. How can I be a little bit more deliberate about the color palette that I'm using, the sound palette that I'm using, and challenge myself to communicate as effectively as possible with as few elements as possible?"

How do you edit yourself? Is there a time where you bring in collaborators and say, "Hey, here's what I have"? How does that process work for you? When it is time for you to bring in another person?

Yeah, it's something I realized recently, that as much as I love writing music on my own, and I've always written songs on my own, there is always a moment, there is always a part of the process where I need to bring other people in. With my last record, *Lavender*, that was earlier in the process. I arranged it, in large part, with my band at the time. But for *The Caretaker*, and this next record that I'm working on, [I get them] pretty far along in terms of the arrangement, all of the beats and all of the synths and midi acoustic instruments that I want to replace with real sounds. But I do find then I need help in editing and being like, "You don't need that sound there," or, "How many synth parts are actually filling up the same frequency range?"

I'm getting better at editing myself, and that's just from years of having collaborators I trust who can help me get into the dense thicket and thin it out. But I do find it to be helpful to have someone else pry your most prized lines out of your hands, in a loving way, like, "I know that you love this, but I think you don't need it." That is an important role, and it can't just be anybody. It has to be someone you really trust, and I've been blessed with collaborators in my life who are friends and musicians I really admire. And I'm always happy to take their feedback. But it can't come too early in the process. I

have to spin out my ideas as far as I can before bringing someone else in.

What do you think of the idea of failure? Is it something that you're afraid of or something you just accept? I've always tried to view it as part of the process. Also, I've always found it useful not to be afraid to try new things I'm maybe not great at, and to be willing to push myself. But it's also hard not to get caught up in that kind of deflation or that moment of, "Oh, wait a second. This didn't land the way I wanted it to."

I've started sketching. I'm doing this little sketch journal, and I am so bad at drawing. It's funny. It's very elemental. It looks like a child's drawings, but there's something really nice about knowing that I'm not doing it to be good. I can take away that value judgment because I'm not striving for that. It's a space for me to just explore, whereas sometimes music can feel like the stakes are a lot higher because this is what I do for my job. It is really nice to have those other outlets where I'm not going to show those to anybody. That's just for me, whereas with my songs, I'm always like, "Okay, who is going to listen to this?" I'm ready to share that and also terrified to share it.

I've been doing Half Waif for a long time. It's taken many years to get to where I am and to have people listening. There have been so many moments that I have said I wanted to quit. But... Well, first of all, I've always been saved from quitting because this is what I love to do more than anything. And I always come back to writing music and how fun it is, how much a place of self-discovery, and it's the thing I love to do most in this life and how I want to spend my time. So I can't quit it. I just keep coming back.

But in terms of failure, [it's about] just continuing to write through it. I finished *The Caretaker*, and I actually felt... I was so close to it and poured so much of myself into it and wasn't sure I liked what I had made. So I immediately started writing another album. That kind of continuation was something I really needed in order to send off those feelings of potential failure. Just keep writing. Just get better. Do it better. Say it clearer. Say it better. Say it in a way that feels truer to the moment. For me, that's always been the way to move forward and fend off that failure in myself. I will try it again. I'll try again and hopefully do better next time.

Do reviews influence your opinion of what you've made?

I wish I was more removed from it, but absolutely. It's pretty human to... I wouldn't say I'm seeking that validation because, again, with *The Caretaker*, I was like, "I'm just going on to the next thing. I'm going to continue to write." But it has been really nice and reassuring, like, "Okay, what I was on to at that point in my life and what I was feeling and what did excite me while I was writing was something worth saying because it has reached someone in a way that is meaningful to them." It's so silly even ascribing weight to those things, but it does feel good when people like it.

It really does have a weight to it. Like you were saying, it's a human thing, and it's nice knowing something you made is something other people are enjoying.

Yeah, totally, and it's also been an interesting thing for me to grapple with because I feel like critical success and commercial success... I don't love those terms, but [I'm] recognizing that they're not the same thing, and that's okay. I mean, of course I'd love to play big shows and have lots and lots of people there, but I think kind of tempering my expectations or my hopes of what this career would be has been helpful. That's not to say I'm defeated, but I'm really proud of how far I've come because it's been a long time. And the fact that anybody is listening and it has touched anybody is incredible, to be sitting in this tiny room and know that people are listening to these songs I wrote. It's, again, that idea of elemental. It's stripping it back to that basic impulse of why I do this.

Nandi Rose Recommends:

1. The motets of Guillaume de Machaut
2. Marina Abramović's memoir Walk Through Walls
3. Cornell's Merlin Bird ID app
4. Essential oils applied at bedtime (I use rose water)
5. Books about nature that are also about so much more: Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer and The Mushroom at the End of the World by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing



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