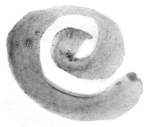
On doing whatever it takes to get the song done



Musician Suzanne Vega on carving out a spot to do your work, the pleasure of writing from someone else's perspective, and doing whatever it takes to make a song work for you.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2249 words.

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At this point in your career, do you have a typical way that you like to work? Do you have your own studio or a place in your home where you like to write, or is it something that you have to constantly change?

It's not that I have to constantly change it, it's just that for some reason I've never really had a place in any of my homes where I just settle in and write. I'm sort of on the verge of doing that now. I have an office, and since my daughter moved out I finally took her bedroom and I have changed it up to be a little studio-esque place, which is unfortunately a big mess right now. We're getting there, let's just put it that way.

So it's the classic story of the kid comes home from college and finds out they don't have a room anymore. Sorry, your old bedroom is now my studio!

Yeah. Well, my daughter, she's been out of college for almost two years now, so it seems ok to do. She still comes home and goes into her old room and throws her stuff on the floor. And that's fine, I don't mind that. It should be that way. But yeah, now it is a question of getting a place here in my house where I can really dig in and work. We're nearly there. It's only taken me 40 years or so to have that.

Are you the kind of person who can work anywhere, as long as you have your guitar?

If it's going well, yes. I can sit in the living room and do it. Sometimes things just occur to me as I'm walking around or I sing into my iPhone. I play guitar lines into my iPhone. I write down lyrics constantly. For a while, I was going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and going to the Patrons Lounge on the top floor. I wrote "New York is My Destination" there.

Do you work better if you know you have a deadline?

I like having a deadline because it forces me to organize myself around work. Otherwise, the other things in my life can take over. But there's nothing like a budget and a deadline to get you really focused. I think it's all those years of a having a major label deal that really got me oriented that way. I would write songs every few weeks back then. It was just how I liked to work. So now I am pretty good about self-imposed deadlines.

If you are free from the old model of the major label album cycle—that hamster-wheel business model of tour, record an album, tour, record an album, tour—is it important that you are always working *towards* something?

I'd say this is probably the first time in my life when I'm *not* specifically working towards anything in particular. I mean, I do have this series of shows coming up at the Café Carlyle, a New York establishment that is very special for me. I'm specifically featuring songs from New York in the show. To me, that was just the obvious thing to do. The Café Carlisle is such an iconic place to play in New York. It's as iconic in its own way as CBGBs was or Carnegie Hall is now. It's smaller and more upscale, but it's still pure New York. I grew up here, and I have a whole bunch of songs that feature New York in various ways, so I thought this was a no-brainer. I fortunately didn't have to write anything new for it. We had already been doing a cover of "Walk on the Wild Side," the Lou Reed song, so we're gonna include that.

You have written really beautifully for New York over the years. Does the city still loom large in your creative mind? It seems to be an evergreen source of inspiration for so many artists.

It's always inspirational to me. There's always, always, always stuff to write about. I live not far from where I grew up, on the Upper West Side. There's always stuff going on, always stuff to think about. I never experienced New York as some sort of easy, fancy place. That's never been it for me. But again, I've never really lived in a neighborhood that The Carlyle is in. I've lived all over the city at one point or another, in most of the neighborhoods. I never have experienced New York City as this generous, nurturing place. Anything that I receive from New York, I've had to scratch and claw to get. But I still love New York. I mean, it's been my home for so long. So I love it in spite of all of its crassness. It also does have its tender, beautiful places also. There is a reason it's the subject of so much art.

Your last album was a collection of songs about Carson McCullers, which was such a cool experiment. How was the experience of writing an album that was solely in this other person's voice?

It was awesome. I just like her so much. I love her work. The whole opportunity to transform into being someone else has always been a thrill to me. When I went to Barnard College, I majored in English Literature, but minored in theater. I had been a dancer before that at the High School for Performing Arts. I grew up loving theater in all of its forms, so it was kind of a return for me to a world that I had really loved.

One of my favorite things to do is to write from other people's perspectives. "Tom's Diner" was written from a friend of mine's perspective. "Luka" was written from the perspective of a small boy. So it's been one of my tricks over the years to assume another persona and write from that persona. That's fun for me. It's also just a good way to get out of your own head. What mattered to me with the McCullers project was that it was authentic. It really could have felt like her. I tried to use her language wherever possible. I tried to infuse the songs with the feeling that she would've had in that moment in her life, while trying to touch on different moments in her life.

You've been writing songs for the past three decades, but do you find that the process of writing songs gets easier over time? Do you ever grapple with that feeling of, "I don't know how I ever did this before" and/or "I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to do this again?"

Oh, I feel that all of the time. *All* the time. There's no template or formula that I use to write a song. I just do whatever I have to do to make it work. I asked Leonard Cohen once, "Do you feel that your writing is confessional?" He said, "I just do whatever I have to to make the song work—lie, confess, make it up." That's how I feel. It's sort of like you're hanging by a cliff and you've gotta safely get back onto the ledge. You're just gonna do whatever it takes to get up there. You're never there with a safety net.

Are you someone who will just continually work on something until you make it work, or is it okay to abandon things?

Ideas are never abandoned. They're always in the compost heap, and they always turn up. To use a gardening metaphor, I'm always in there with a pitchfork turning things over to see whether the time is right for something to become fertilizer—"Oh, that idea. I can finally use that now."

I'm sort of a thematic writer and I circle back to the same themes a lot, so something that I was thinking about

15 years ago is probably something I'll still be thinking about 15 years later, but maybe from a different perspective. Maybe that means my first verse is from 15 years ago and it might take that long to get around to the second verse. So yeah, I don't abandon. I go back and check on things from time to time, to see if it's something worth revealing.

Are you a habitual worker? Do you tend to work on music everyday, or have a set routine?

No. It's not like that. I feel as though I should have a routine, but I don't. My routine really just has to do with missing the guitar. I went off the road right after Thanksgiving and it's taken me months to lose all of the calluses on my fingers. Now I really feel like it's time to sit down with a guitar again, just because my hand feels naked without the little calluses. I really feel the guitar calling to me, so I need to sit down and do that, not to mention we're starting rehearsals next week, so it would be good to get the guitar out of the closet.

The rest of it, as far as writing songs, it's more like hearing voices. I'll hear a line or hear a melody or hear a phrase in my head or see an image and think, "Oh, I need to get this down." So that is constantly going on. You know when you start hearing those things that it's time to start working, that you have something to say.

Do you have tips or tricks about what to do when you get stuck, or ways to get started?

There are a few. As far as getting started, lots of people who really want to make a song have figured that out already. I very rarely get asked for advice from people who have never written a song and want to know how to get started. It's usually about getting stuck or feeling like they've painted themselves into a corner. I remember getting asked a question from this one kid who was probably 13 years old. He wanted to know if it was okay to always write in A minor. He liked writing classical piano pieces and his favorite key was A minor. My favorite key is also A minor, so he wanted to know if that was okay.

I said, "Yeah. If it's your signature. If you *really* feel compelled, go for it. But you might want to stretch it out and do some major key pieces from time to time, because it's a little easier for an eventual audience. You wanna add some contrast. On the other hand, you also have to go with your strengths, and maybe that's your trademark. You're just a sad writer. Like me." I try to give them information like that, to put it into some sort of context, because a kid like that needs to know that you have options. You know, there will be an audience and you might want to think about entertaining them, but on the other hand, ultimately everybody finds their own way. Maybe you only need to entertain yourself, you know?

Suzanne Vega recommends:

I'll recommend some New York things. I love Central Park. I walk with my husband there everyday, and our dog Molly. We cover all of central park, basically. We go north, we go south, we change it up everyday. We walk for an hour to an hour-and-a-half. I never went to Central Park as a kid. I always went to Riverside Park, because Central Park was pretty distressing back in the seventies. It just wasn't safe at all. Now it's so beautiful. I recommend Central Park in all weather, any weather—raining, snowing, sunny, cloudy, whatever. It's just great to get out there and see what Central Park is up to.

If anyone ever has the chance to take the number five bus in Manhattan, the route is amazing. I can't remember what I was doing that required me to first take that specific route, but I remember thinking, "This is the perfect bus route," because it takes you down Riverside and you see all the glory of the Hudson River, and then it turns on 72nd Street and then it goes down to 59th Street, and 59th Street is really interesting too. Then you've got the park right there, and then it goes down 5th Avenue all the way down to Greenwich Village. So if you live here, if you are visiting here, if you ever have the chance to take the number five bus, it's a long, slow, beautiful ride. A very New York experience.

Another thing I love is the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It's my favorite place. My parents were very modern, and I had all of these bohemian teachers that were always dragging us off to MoMA. I love MoMA, it's fine, but when I went to the Met for the first time, I thought, "This is really where I belong." It's so old-fashioned and beautiful. Of course it has its modern bits, too, but I love it for its deep roots and its history, just the

sheer beauty of the place. It’s so sumptuously gorgeous. Just all of the old portraits and all of the ideas. It’s really a special place that I try and go to once a month.

Name

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Vocation

Musician

Photo credit: George Holz