

On coming back after burnout



Musician Xenia Rubinos discusses managing expectations, balancing collaboration with solitude, continuing to grow as an artist, and remembering to check in with yourself.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2699 words.

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

You released your second album titled *Black Terry Cat* in 2016 and you released the album, *Una Rosa*, in 2021. Can you describe how were those years in between these two albums?

Well, a lot happened in my personal life and in the world. The pandemic happened and after *Black Terry Cat* was released, I did quite a bit of touring on my own as a headliner for the first time and also as an opener. I had been on a lot of support tours and I really squeezed the lemon of that record, I tried to play as many shows as possible.

Trump was also elected during that record touring cycle, and I got home from touring feeling very exhausted and empty. I think I had just been going through a lot of personal changes and not really taking care of myself. When I released that album I put all of myself into my work and really didn't take the time to grieve the loss of my father who passed away right before I had finished that album.

I also split with my manager and was looking for a new team and also figuring out what I wanted to do and how to do it. And it felt kind of crazy because that album was critically acclaimed. But at the end of the cycle, I came out empty, in my spirit and also financially. It was like a strain for me that year. So I was reevaluating things. And then, for the following five years, I continued to put out work. I did a museum residency at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I was composing music for a podcast, and I also was researching and writing some music but I was not interested in writing songs. In 2019, I started doing "Personajes", like a character called Xenia 2020, where I started learning boleros and singing, taking on different characters.

In retrospect, it's like I had my breakdown during that moment. Creatively, it was a very creative moment for me but it was also a moment of destruction that happened and it was very difficult. Going into 2020, I was healing and I started working on the album. Some of it happened in the studio, but some of it had been around for multiple years. I looked at my partner and producer, Marco Buccelli, and I was like, "I need to make this album. Can you please help me? I need to do this. I don't know how to do this." And so, we just went through an archive of all of my stuff and picked the ideas to work on and started slowly doing it and it was like a year process of making it and then slowly, the concept of the album came together.

What was the process like for deciding to make a new album?

Basically, I had a contract that I had to fulfill and there was an album that had been kind of waiting to be handed in. It was more of a necessity. Getting it done was the impetus to make this album. I was like, "Okay, this is the money that you have that's there for you to make it. So, go ahead and do it." It was more of a practical decision and also a place to give me a structure to hold onto. It wasn't so organic, it was more just like, "Okay. I need something to put my energy into and I need money and I have this job, so I'm going to do my

job." And it then became a healing space for me. It became that but I didn't perceive that being that way at the time when we started.

So basically you did this album because of a contract. How did these circumstances affect the creative process in terms of writing the songs, the production of the material, and then meeting certain deadlines?

I'm really blessed and grateful to have been working with my label ANTI because they were very understanding and patient and were always following up with me and I'm always working. In terms of deadlines, it was really up to me, which can be difficult. And it's really helpful to work with other people that hold you accountable for the things that you say you're going to do. Whenever I get into a big project, I always want to finish it quicker than it really is possible most of the time. So, I would put a deadline, and Marco would look at me and be like, "This is not reasonable, Xenia. You need a little bit more. We need more time than this."

Then, the studio practice that we developed was of working on the album from this time to this time, and this is what needs to get done. That was actually really helpful to me because I had something to show up to and slowly just really gave myself over to the craft of making music, of writing, of producing. I was just only thinking about that and what the track needs, and in a very kind of detached, emotional way. I wasn't really thinking about what is this record going to mean for me, or what am I saying, what are the messages about me in this record. It wasn't about me. It was about these characters, it was about the music and the craft. That was super helpful.

And then, the pandemic happened and the anxiety of spring festivals and parties disappeared because nobody was seeing anyone. There were no expectations for anything that you should be doing. We're all just figuring this out. And it kind of felt like everybody joined me on my level. All of a sudden, I could be in solitude and just kind of work on this thing. I felt like I had more time and there was less expected. There was no expectation for me at all. And then, slowly, throughout the year, as we continued working, I started finding pleasure in making again and I started finding different inspirations and got the idea for the tracklisting and the videos and the cover. And I wish it could always be like that, where you have structure but it's also somewhat flexible that you can kind of see what's happening with the music or what you're feeling like. Somebody that you met, a collaborator that you want to work with visually, and then you can kind of shift from there.

Do you think expectations get in the way of the pleasure of creating work?

I'm a student of all of this. I'm learning. I'm growing all the time. Letting go of expectations was a huge part of the process of making this record. I would lie to say that I had no expectations. It's not that I had none. But I would say that it was about practicing being present. It was about presence. If you're present in what you're doing, you're not as much focused on what's going to happen later. You're focused on what's happening right now.

I do think that expectations can get in the way of feeling the pleasure because then, you're so focused on what you thought that day was going to be like. And then, you miss how that day is. I was having some anxiety around the release day of this album. And an exercise that I did was that I wrote down the best possible release day that I could ever have. I wrote a story about this is how the release day went. It was the best-case scenario. And then, I wrote the worst-case scenario. It was fun but it was a great way to take me out of my mind a little bit, and also allow myself permission to dream and to have expectations too. Because I think it's a loaded word. I think it's normal to allow yourself to have some expectations but it's like...managing that. I was lucky to realize throughout this process that I had kind of already won everything in the process of making it. And it sounds corny, but it's true.

I remember the morning Marco and I were listening to the record, I think we were approving the mixes before it was going to master, and I went to get something in another room, and I was hearing it from far away, and it was the first time that I realized I made a record. I was kind of like, "Wow." Because I was so inside of it and there was just a split second where I'm like, "Whoa. We made a record and it sounds so good." And I'm like, "Oh my god. It sounds like what I had been thinking those four years ago." I was imagining something that sounded like this and I did it and I made it. And just that feeling, those little moments. That is the success. Almost like that eclipses any other validation or any other expectation that's so out of my control. So much of it is there.

I think it's easy to lose sight of that pleasure when you're so caught up in whatever you want to do to grow, business-wise, or I want to have more of an audience or I want whatever. Whatever people's validations are. Or looking at what other people are doing and thinking how come not me. That can really do a number on you. And social media is like the vilest space for that kind of expectations, and comparison game, but it's also our main mode of communication in sharing music and telling people what we're doing. So it's like you're on there, but at the same time, you're trying not to be on there and it's wild. It would be easier if we expected nothing because we could just be in the pleasure and in the present moment of whatever we're receiving and feeling and be sad, disappointed, be whatever, or be happy. We would be able to feel more.

You have mentioned that touring life is not what you really hope to go back to. How do you envision performing live in the future?

I had no boundaries. I did a tour where we played 30 shows in 33 days. I think I played 14 consecutive shows. On a practical level, just having a rule where I don't play more than four consecutive shows, it's already something easy to say but it can be financially difficult, but it's a choice. I really enjoy touring, performing, and being on stage. It's exciting and it's fun to travel. But, at a certain point, I was pushing myself thinking that that's what I had to do in order to be successful, or I put my dues in, put my work in, and that I can earn whatever. And what I realized is you don't have to be miserable to be successful. You don't need to hurt yourself to be good. Your suffering doesn't equal that you earned something.

Also, the way that I was touring was pretty scrappy and DIY. It just takes a toll on your body. My partner Marco and I did tours just as a duo opening for other bands and I had a blast. I had so much fun. But I also put my body through a lot. And at a certain point, you're not even thinking anymore. I carry all my own gear in and out. People don't realize you load in and out. I sell all of my merch. I also think that the industry can be very toxic and it feels like you're running a rat race a little bit and like you're just album, touring, album, touring, album. You tour and then you play this capacity venue. And then, you try to sell that out. And then, once you sell that out, then you're going to try to play the next capacity venue. And you sell that out. And then, you want to try to get a tour bus. And then you want to try to play the festivals. And it's not as much about the quality of what I'm doing and it's just the quantity of it.

The other thing is the access that I gave people to my body, physically, it was draining, and I didn't realize how tiring that was. I didn't stop performing until the last person was out of the venue, because after the show, you don't want to disappoint someone. Here it is. Expectations. If I wasn't feeling well I would just keep going. Or there were times when I would sometimes go into the audience and people grabbed me. This guy grabbed my breast. This other woman grabbed my crotch during the show. And I didn't stop the show. It didn't occur to me that that wasn't okay. I realize now is that just was an example of the mentality that I was in, that I was so focused on getting the job done and just working and I wasn't taking care of myself. I could have paused and asked myself "hey, are you okay? Do you need to stop or do you need to ask that person to leave? You can stop it's okay." That mentality is something that I'm looking forward to changing.

And I also think that artists, at least in my realm, at my stage of the game or whatever, it's all about us making money on the road. And to me, it's just not sustainable, frankly. And I'm not interested in perpetuating that system. I don't know all the answers to how to make this happen, but I know that it starts from me and my mentality and having some boundaries clear. I'm going to make mistakes. I'm going to mess up. Things are going to happen that I don't want them to. But at least if I start from that intention of protecting myself and to continue with my main intention, which is to grow as an artist. So if everything is coming from there, then I think it will guide me.

I want to circle back to the first question. If you could tell something to the Xenia of 2016, what would you say to her?

"¿Cómo estás? How are you?" And then, she would say some bullshit. And then, I would be like, "No, how are you? What's going on?" Then, maybe I would say, "Don't forget yourself. Stop. Take more time. You're going too fast". That's why making music is such a wild mirror. Or making art. Making anything. It's can be a picture of your process. In a way, if I haven't gone through all of those things that I didn't, I wouldn't be the same person I

am now. So I do wish I could go and change some things, but at the same time, there were a lot of painful things and beautiful things. But, I think just asking myself to check in with myself.

Xenia Rubinos Recommends:

turn your phone off for the whole day and go outside, stare at the sky, breathe deeply, touch something of the natural world- a plant, a flower, the ground, listen, get lost alone wandering and wondering.

when in NYC, visit the Noguchi Museum garden with a notepad and write a quiet moment for yourself

eat a slice of guava paste with salty cheese on top of a ritz cracker

read this book Daily Rituals: How Artists Work by Mason Currey. It's light and you can open it up to any page or read it backwards. it's just a nice reminder that there is no right way to do this daily art-making thing.

lay somewhere quiet, close your eyes, and open your body ears as you listen to "Piano Concerto in G Major, M. 83: 2. Adagio Assai" by Maurice Ravel, performed by Alicia de Laroccha and the London Symphony Orchestra

Name

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Vocation

singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist

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Michelle Arcila