Rickie Lee Jones on finding the right environment to make music

August 7, 2017 - Rickie Lee Jones is a Grammy-winning American musician and songwriter with a career spanning five decades. Famously dubbed "The Duchess of Coolsville" by *Time* magazine, Jones has recorded 16 studio albums in various musical styles including rock, R&B, blues, pop, soul, and jazz. Here Jones describes how a radical change of scenery impacted her ability to write new songs. "As an artist, you don't always realize how damaging rudeness or social isolation actually is," she explains. "In L.A. everybody is totally isolated. They stay in their cars. They don't look at each other when they say simple things. It's so easy to let that stuff sneak up on you. You let the world wear you down without even realizing it."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2327 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Anxiety, Adversity, Independence, Identity.

One of your classic records, *Pirates*, will be 36 years old this year and I know you'll be doing some performances to celebrate it. How do you feel about those songs now? Does it feel strange to revisit this intimate portrait of your life from three decades ago?

I don't think anything has changed. I often liken the building of the records to building a house. It just doesn't change for me. It's like some play I wrote. When I walk into the room, and take on the main key characters, it's always the same for me. If anything, I respect it a little more now. When you have to play as a thing over and over to make a living, your relationship with it is not so precious, but I was playing the music from *Pirates* the other day I and think it is remarkable. Not only does it represent an entire piece of emotional life, it's also remarkable because I didn't know how to play the piano then. Everything on that record I just sort of sounded out to myself while I was making it. I knew what notes I wanted, but I didn't know how to play. The creation of it feels remarkable to me, but aside from that I think it's just a really pretty piece of music.

You've worked in a variety of genres over the years. Has your process changed radically as well?

I think it has. Your writing is an extension and an expression of you as person, as well as a document of a place in time. When I was 22 all of my life was still before me. Possibilities. My notebooks were filled with possibilities. All of those benchmarks you're supposed to achieve—marriage, children, money, fame, whatever it is you set out for yourself—it's all ahead of you. Once you get past that stuff, you have a totally different relationship with *everything*. It's like you did what you had to do, and now you get to do whatever you feel like doing. In a way that's harder on art, because art needs an anchor. It needs a reason that you have to do it. I think if you have too much money and too much free time, it can be very hard to have a good reason to make things. I denied that for a long time. I said, "Nah you don't have to be in crisis. You don't have to have a problem." I can only speak for my own experience, but for me to write something that can actually live outside my body, it does seem to come from a great need to say something… and that need only usually happens if there's some kind of terrible pain. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, pain still occurs no matter what age you are, no matter how much you have.

You've spoken publicly in the past about going through long periods of writer's block and struggling to make music. When that happens, how do you get through it? What sustained you?

I just wait. I accept that I might not write anymore. I accept that life changes and that maybe it's not the end of the world even if it feels like it. That was a thing going on about 15 years ago with me. I don't really feel that way anymore, but when it was happening it was hard. It feels like it might never come again, and then you just accept it.

How did you know when the writer's block had passed? Was it just a feeling?

That's a hard question for me to answer, because I don't really have any specific way I do a thing, because it's almost always changing. Right now I feel a certain flourishing. I feel a garden of ideas. I feel accepting of my job. There was a period of time when I felt I wasn't writing good enough music. The process then is to accept that you are not writing good enough songs and make the choice to write better, or just deal with the acceptance that you're not as good of a writer as you used to be and move on. One reason it's hard for me is that I also have to make a living. I'm not rich. I don't really have a devoted producer like I used to have, someone that gave me unlimited access to recording studios where I could really shout out my imagination. I could spend hours and hours in the studio back then. I don't have that anymore. I have to ask myself how I can do this now. How do I do my best knowing how good my best can be?

I'm not talking about necessarily the fruit of what I do. I'm talking about the process. In some ways I have nothing else to do but write, and maybe that's where you get your best work, right? You just write and write and write. But because you got to take the dogs out, and there are messes that need to be cleaned up, and laundry, and other things asking for your attention. Maybe you've only got an hour to work on this today. You've got to pay your rent or your mortgage and you need to play shows to do that, so there's pressure to finish things quickly. How can you do your best? It's very hard. After I moved to New Orleans I just started remembering what it's like to not have a record contract and what it's like to just love writing. I'm trying to convince myself—in a good way—that nobody is ever going to hear what I write. I hope that will somehow take this pressure off me so that I can just sit down and keep working on that chorus.

For a lot of us, even with a successful recording career, you still just get poorer and poorer, and these things all feeds into each other. You end up feeling bad about yourself, which is no good. The great work really does come from feeling good about yourself. Even a poor old French poet walking down the street, he secretly feels good about himself because he knows he's a great writer, right? That's the feeling you want to pursue, feeding the things that make you feel good and knowing when you are doing a good job. Maybe you just write a very simple song, but when it's got that contentment in it, that is what makes people feel good. That's what makes it good.

Do you attribute your current creative flourishing to having moved to New Orleans?

I do. I think removing myself from Los Angeles was so important. Everything there is about the business of my work, and you do get used to it, but everybody there is always acting. Everybody's friendship is weighed and measured. They just are. Maybe it used to be that when you went to Hollywood to eat at Dan Tana's restaurant and they escorted you immediately to your table. Then one day they don't do that anymore. That isn't what actually happened to me, but it's things like that that feed the spiral of feeling, "I'm no longer relevant."

Eventually all you start to see yourself as is a business. I lost the sense of me. I was just the business called Rickie Lee Jones that was somehow no longer viable, not making enough people enough money. It all comes down to money. It really always does. So I removed myself from all that. Here in New Orleans I see a bunch of kids taking their own alternative path to making music and art and it's so inspiring to me. I need that, and it reminds me who I truly am. However I've been marketed over the years, I was never a pop singer. I was always outside of whatever box happened to be popular. That's where I was comfortable—outside of a box. I'm not punk rock. I'm not classic rock. I'm not this. I'm not that. I'm my own person, and I felt like I had become squeezed into a pop thing that wasn't me.

I came from a generation of singers and songwriters that really did get to craft their own path through the music business. It was that rare and wonderful thing where you insist on something and they just accept it. Many people say how amazing it is that I do what I want, but the few times that I've acclimated to what others want, the work has failed. I found that when I mix it up with others—either because of my own weakness, or my own desire to be accepted, or for whatever reason—it just doesn't come out as well.

What can you say about the music you're making now?

Well, when I got here to New Orleans I just tried to take in a little happiness. That seems important to me. I wanted to be a part of everything I heard around me, so that's what I did. Now I am sort of making myself do what I did with songs like "The Last Chance Texaco". I'm just trying to go in different directions and wake my mind up to a variety of ideas and open myself up musically. It's important to learn new things, try new things, not be afraid. Even if you've been doing this for years.

I'm enjoying what I'm writing. As much as I like dancing, I don't think I'm ever going to be a real rhythmic songwriter. That's not what I write. I like stories. I think these new songs are going to be compositions like *Pirates* or *The Magazine*. Maybe I'll have a song or two like the ones on my first record. I can't tell you yet, but I feel like what I want to do is

compose an entire long piece, but we'll see.

How do you feel about performing? Do you enjoy it?

I like performing. I get exhausted now. I'm not old, but I'm a little older. It's a lot of work. When I don't go out on the road for a long time I don't know what to do with myself. When I'm out for a long time, it takes about two months for me to transition back into the regular world. I spend a lot of time in bed when I get back, then eventually I start gardening and finding a routine. Eventually I'll pick up the guitar and start writing. It's kind of like being an astronaut, you know? Just two totally different environments to adjust to.

So, yes, I like performing, and for the more people the better. Still, so much of it has to do with promotion and booking the right rooms and money. Everything about our society is about money. When you have money, you can make more money. When you don't have money, it takes a miracle to jump over that hedge and get into the money making thing. Having been a recipient of a miracle in my life, I know it's possible… but it's never easy.

I like what you said about giving yourself some time to take in a little happiness. The idea of putting yourself in the right frame of mind and exercising a little self-care can be so crucial when it comes to making any kind of art.

Yeah. I think it's seeing the world from behind your eyes instead of from the other side. It's so easy for us to sit outside ourselves and judge. Especially if you're famous. Fame is terrible. It's a poison. It's exotic and terrible. It's not the same as money, which is it's own kind of curse. When you are famous you start standing outside yourself with all the other people, looking at this person that you no longer even recognize. Leaving that all behind, I feel like I'm getting back inside my own body again. One thing about New Orleans is the friendliness of people. It's a thing I haven't experienced in far too long. I'm very sensitive. When people look at me and nod, or say good morning, or say hello, they draw my spirit out into the world. They help me be intact.

As an artist—and just as a person—you don't always realize how damaging rudeness or social isolation actually is. In L.A. everybody is totally isolated. They stay in their cars. They don't look at each other when they say simple things. For me, I'm just feeling safer somehow. I don't know if I actually am, but I feel like I am. It's so easy to let that stuff sneak up on you. You let the world wear you down without even realizing it.

So, right now I hope to keep writing. I'm writing some music and I was working on a book. As much as I can, I want to concentrate on making art instead of performing. The reality is that I have to perform. I have to do that to make money, and that's okay. I'd rather do it less often so that when I did go out I could have lots of lights and do a big show, but I'm a working girl. I have to keep performing, but I want to do it as little as possible until I have finished something new, whether it's the book, or a record, or a story. Got to finish something. Don't you think? For any artist that's always the main thing—you just have to finish.

Essential Rickie Lee Jones:

Rickie Lee Jones (1979)

Pirates (1981)

The Magazine (1984)

Pop Pop (1991)

The Devil You Know (2012)

Name
Rickie Lee Jones

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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Gina Binkley