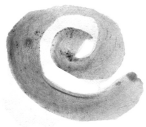
On having a clear vision



Singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega discusses early success, collaboration and staying true to one's vision.

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As told to Giuliana Mayo, 2301 words.

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Can you speak about collaboration in your work? You have a music director for your band, but I think when people think Suzanne Vega, they think singer/songwriter, which is a very solo thing. You've worked with some really dazzling people, and I'm just curious: how do you go from singer-songwriter to collaborator?

Well, I wrote my first song when I was 14, and then I got a record deal when I was 24 and my first songs were very solo. I sat in my room and I wrote them alone, and I didn't seek other people's opinions, and I did not get anybody else's opinions, which was fine with me. But then, when I was about 22 I started working with my management team, Ron Fierstein and Steve Addabbo were my managers and producers. Steve Addabbo had thoughts and opinions and ideas about how to arrange the things, and we started to write together, because he would write a bridge, or he would write an intro, or, you know, arrange things in a certain way. So I started to get used to that. And in fact, by the time I did *Solitude Standing*, I was writing with a band, and so they got royalties as part of the publishing. And so this was something I learned to welcome. I've worked with a lot of people. I've worked with Philip Glass, I've worked with They Might Be Giants. I've worked with Lenny Kaye and all kinds of people. And so it's something that I welcome, because I'm confident in myself. My ideas tend to be simple, and then I tend to repeat them. I'm always satisfied with something in its simpler form. But other people seem to like other things, like bridges, which is, okay, great, let's make a bridge.

To that point, I remember reading about Fiona Apple throwing out an album that John Brion had produced because she felt like she had made a "John Brion album" and not a "Fiona Apple album." Have you ever encountered that feeling where someone's hand is a little heavy?

No. Some people have said that about the Mitchell Froome albums, and they're like, "Oh, she changed her style to suit her husband." And I'm like, that is so wrong. That is not how it happened. The first thing I worked on with Mitchell Froome, way before we got married, the day I met him, practically to start working, was the song "Blood Makes Noise." I sang the song into the air. And he said, Okay, let me work on this. And I left him alone with it overnight, and the next day he had that rhythm, that crashing anvil sound and the bass line. And I loved it. I loved it. I thought, "This is amazing." It made me laugh. I thought it was really powerful. I thought that was fantastic. And it way surpassed what I had thought of. So I was in charge of that collaboration. You know, Mitchell basically serves the artist. He's not there to make his own point of view. He's there to do what you want him to do, and I found that to be exactly the way he worked. So those albums that we did were him serving my ideas. And I just thought it was, obviously it was an amazing collaboration, because it really took off personally and in every other way. So, no, I've never had someone like that.

I'm curious if you consider your Carson McCullers project to be a collaboration or a conversation. You've been working on this one woman show and album since college and kind of reworking it every so many years. It's really fascinating that this idea has been with you–to your point about having an idea and repeating it. This is clearly something that's held you for so many years.

Yes. This has really held me for decades. Now, any theater piece is a collaboration, because you don't just get up there and start talking, pretending you're somebody else. You know, there's always a context: a theater, a director, a costume designer, a producer, all these people get in on the act when you are working in the theater. So it's much more collaborative even than music. But the singular idea of becoming Carson McCullers and singing her life and putting her life's problems on the stage has never changed for me. That's always been the basic thing. And not only that, but the tenets that she embodies for me, that was the exciting thing for me, was seeing how this woman who lived, who was at her height of fame in the early 1940s the way she lived. She was somehow able to embody the very ideals that she wrote about. And ideals is not the right word, the ideology that she wrote about. This is an interesting question, because, as I think I've mentioned, I've worked with Philip Glass, and at one point he asked me to interview him for NPR… And I asked him how he chose the people that were the subjects of his operas, because he's got, you know, "Satyagraha," and he's got "Einstein on the Beach." So I said, How do you choose who to work with in your operas? And he said, "Oh, that's easy. It's the ideology." I look at the man, and I say, "What's the ideology here?" And then he works with the ideology of the man and the time of the man that [his piece] is talking about.

And that really struck me, because I thought, why doesn't that happen with women? You know, we never see someone putting a woman up on screen to talk about her ideology. It's always about her sex appeal, or maybe her talent. We have biopics about women and their talents, but we never, almost never, talk about their ideologies. I really wanted to make that clear in my piece that we're talking about a woman with an ideology, and that ideology is the idea of agape love, which is brotherly love, which in her life, took precedence over everything else. And so in that way, Philip influenced my writing of my piece.

Do you feel like this is a conversation that will continue? Or do you feel like you will have finally put it to bed?

Well, I put it to bed until it wakes up again. If someone were to say, "I love the film, let's do a revival." Say, let's have Cole Escola play Carson McCullers in the first act. Then someone else, maybe me again, could play Carson on her deathbed. You know, right before she dies (one is never too old to play Carson in the second act). If someone were to say, let's do some kind of production, I'd be there in five seconds. But for now, it's put to bed because I don't feel the urge to keep reinventing it, redoing it.

You talked about all the people that go into making a production. In researching you, I saw that you have a strong dance background, then you did time costuming and then acting. I wonder how all of that plays into being a performer, like that foundation of training that you had before you started performing?

Oh, all of it has fed into performing. I think I felt a desire from a very early age to be on a stage. I think I was four years old, the first time I actually saw an empty wooden stage with a spotlight on it. And I remember the moment feeling like… whatever that is, I want to go there and be in that light, that's where I want to be. And some of that I think, is that as a child, and even as an adult, finding the form and the ways of expressing, especially expressing emotion, is hard for me. With some people, it happens naturally. You have a feeling, you express it, and it's done. I don't feel emotions that way. I see them in image form, or sometimes I have a delay. I feel a feeling. It takes a while to process the feeling, and then maybe it hits me 24 hours later, or it's a week. I've never been really able to be in sync the way some people are. It's probably a neurodivergent type thing. So I learned that you could express your emotions in art and in performing, and so that's why I kept training myself. That was a way of trying to express myself, which I find difficult.

Carson McCullers and you both had early success. In music, you see people who have really early success, and then they chase it and don't get it and burn out and disappear. I wonder how you've dealt with that, because I'm sure that there was a pressure from the record company to chase it, a pressure to repeat levels of success. How have you dealt with that? Because you're still here, and you are still creating in all these different ways, instead of having kind of succumbed to the chase.

I guess because I've had training in so many different areas, and also I have a family, and that is very important to me. I suppose between 1985 and 1990 I sold 5 million albums, and I definitely wanted to continue making albums, but at that moment in time, my thoughts were more like, who am I going to have a family with? I

wanted to have children. So, I try to follow my enthusiasms and go with what I love, do what excites me, and somehow chasing chart success did not feel exciting to me. Plus, how was I going to do that? I mean, how could I have foreseen the chart success of the remix of "Tom's Diner?" And so in some ways, I kind of did try and chase it, because I felt that the remix opened the door to more experimental sounds. Like I thought, Okay, people have accepted "Tom's Diner" the remix, let's see what they think about "Blood Makes Noise." And that was successful in its own way. It was a number one alternative hit in 1992 so I did, in my own way, chase it. But I also learned that it's not fun… But I think it's just better in life to follow your heart and your desire and live a life. Live your life. And that's what I've done. I'm happy and that's I think the important thing.

It seems like the theme of your career is that you've kind of stuck with what you believe in, and you haven't been swayed by other folks, and that has worked out.

It's that vision of being four years old and seeing the wooden stage with the spotlight on it. I mean, that's the root of it all, really. Yeah, I do [different] things. Yeah, I've done a film, but the basis of the whole thing is the chemistry between a performer and an audience and that live spark.

Do you ever think about how someone can come up now, and how they can develop that connection and audience?

Yeah, it's still the same thing. I mean, when I was younger, one of the things that helped my success in a small way, but small is good. And small in a way, is like the basic principle of what comes later. I kept a mailing list if anybody approached me anywhere, even at a bad audition, even if I went to, you know, hoot night at the Bitter End and was turned down, yet once again. If anybody came up to me saying, "I really like your songs, I like your work," I would take down their name and address. Everytime I had a show anywhere, I would do a flyer mailing. And I treated that mailing list like gold. This was like, this was a golden thing. Now we have the internet, which is its own form of mailing list. You know those people who sign up for Facebook or whatever your forum is, Instagram, that's your base.

Having been through all that, what does success look like to you now?

Success, to me, means having enough money to do what you like and to help others, you know, you need to help others. People need help. And being able to do what you love and have people find joy in it. I love performing, and if people find joy in watching me perform, that's great. That's the thing. That's the whole deal. And that's sort of what success is looking like to me right now.

Is there anything else you'd like to hit before we say goodbye?

Just hang in there. I mean, that's my advice to everybody right now, in any position, wherever you are, whether you're starting out, whether you're at the crest of your success, or whether you might have passed your peak and think it's all over. You know, just hang in there and keep going and find ways to bring joy to yourself and others because I think we're living in difficult times.

Suzanne Vega recommends:

Website: The Real Real–a fun way to get cool clothes and help the planet.

Sleepytime cocoa: MoonBrew. Made with magnesium and no melatonin.

Movie: *Blue Moon* with Ethan Hawke. Love!! So much. So damn good. Really.

Music: I used to listen to this collection as a teenager while doing the dishes.

Book: *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters To Nelson Algren* by Simone De Beauvoir. The title says it all.

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Vocation

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