

On building your own joyful universe



The late Allee Willis on her experiences as a songwriter, creating the world you want to live and work in, and the valuable, life-affirming skill of throwing the perfect party.

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As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 3538 words.

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How important is world-building, as far as an exercise of imagination and creating a space that you feel good in?

I view absolutely everything as a canvas for self-expression. That goes from your hair to your clothes to your living space—it is yours to decorate to make you feel as comfortable in the world as possible. As far as world-building in general, I'm exceptionally conscious of that. I am the very first person ever to conceptualize a social network and start evangelizing about it, which happened as early as 1991.

I was very frustrated with my songwriting career, almost immediately, as soon as I started having hits. My very first hit was "[September](#)" by Earth, Wind & Fire, followed by "[Boogie Wonderland](#)," and all but two songs on the album that crossed them over into a really broad audience, which was *I Am*.

I was very blessed to have my big break with a group that was incredibly socially conscious. It was about tweaking humanity. These songs had a purpose—the message of we are all one, anything you do impacts everyone else, live with social responsibility. I didn't realize it at the time, because I was not spiritual at all, but this had a massive influence on me. "September" was a departure for Earth, Wind & Fire lyrically, but we very consciously wrote that. As soon as that intro started, you were happy. That song has that effect on everyone. I feel like I, with Earth, Wind & Fire, placed something very positive into the world.

But as soon as I had those hits, you go from being a total unknown to everyone in the world wanting to write with you. I was getting over 100 songs cut a year, which meant I was a machine. It was just very frustrating for me—writing to music that didn't mean that much to me a lot of the time, when I was just doing lyrics. As a consequence, it made me not want to stay a songwriter for very long after I had hits. And through a very tortuous journey, really through today, my quest was always finding things that were creatively motivated, which meant I really became a self-funded artist, always looking for new ways to express myself.

If you ask me to this day what I think I'm best at, it's throwing parties. My parties are like kids' birthday parties on acid. I love creating environments where like-minded people [can get together]—not necessarily from the same clique or the same profession. You could be an A-list movie star, you could be a plumber, if I think your brain is at a certain level, you're here. I would hand-make everything, souvenirs, sets, cast fictional characters to run incredibly stupid games I would make up. And I'm on mic the entire time, because I don't have time to spend with individual people; therefore, if you hear every single conversation I have with everyone, you feel like you've spent the evening with me, when in fact I've spent no time with you other than the conversation that everyone is hearing.

I was always interested in connecting people through my work, and I considered parties more like performance art. These parties, which I started throwing in the early '80s, started getting press. Everyone knew about them. I could not throw a party and not invite someone without them feeling bad, and my house is only so big—I had to get the parties out of the backyard. That's how my interest in the internet developed. This was 1991 and it was mostly coders, all business-oriented, and I thought, "Well, at least this could be funny." I was sick of music. I had a whole separate art career. I didn't enjoy being in galleries. I've never functioned well within a structure, but in the meantime, I had somehow sold 60 million records. To this day, I don't know how to play. My whole thing is just be yourself, and if you're interested in music and you want to write music, it doesn't make a difference to me whether you know how to play or sing or whatever, just do it. Bang two pencils together. You can write music. That was the spirit of the parties.

When I looked at the internet at that point, which was not very developed at all, everything was sterile and I believed that the internet was truly a place to live. So I started conceptualizing this thing. I thought, "Why do you need to be at my house on a Saturday night at 8:00, when I can connect you all in cyberspace?" It was about community and building worlds. At one point I didn't know what to call myself, and so I became a universe planner. Throughout the '90s, my entire concentration was spent on this medium, how do you bring people together? I think world-building is everything. I think there is a massive lack of it today, and we are in danger of losing the world, literally. This is about sharing this space, keeping it alive. The greatest things you can have in life are connections and friends.

People talk about third spaces, outside of their home or work—somewhere to convene. A song can be a space, a world that's created with intent. When crafting a song, how much of it is about the energy that you want to pass on?

For me, honestly, 90%. I was blessed with being asked to co-write *The Color Purple* musical. I am not a Broadway musical person. I am bottom-feeder TV. But *The Color Purple* had such a strong message—that by enriching another person's life you are enriching your life and everyone around you. Getting to write something like that, that's all about how you create a world in which you are happy, at your most creative. By the way, creativity makes people very happy, it's an unbelievable mode of self-expression. The more that you can put your feeling into something physical or something like a song or a story or whatever, it's really healthy for the spirit. Getting entrusted with a property that was that valuable felt the same way as Earth, Wind & Fire. It wasn't just, write a musical or write a song. The message is incredibly important. I felt like after writing that, I could not work on anything that didn't have social value. What does the world need just another song for? Even if it's transparent, if it's just a mood elevator, it's very important to do that. I have no ambition just to work on a song because it's a big artist. I have to believe it's got a purpose higher than getting to number one.

You're building a world that is very cohesive and immersive. As you do this, how much is there an overlapping of sensorial elements?

Massive, massive. I always had a visual idea to go along with a thematic idea. This is why my parties were so important to me. I could express it in a completely 100% environmental way—meaning every one of the senses has to be hit. And that's the power of creative expression to me. I get asked to write a lot of songs. I don't really enjoy it so much if I'm only in there for the music. If I'm really stimulated by the artist, it's the whole package to me—their attitude as well as what the video's like, what the stage show's like. I love artists where it's a completely immersive experience.

I have always been interested in the very highest level, the 1%, where creative thought is just unbelievable and drives the culture. But I am just as fascinated with the bottom of it. If you tell me that a bar band in Pacoima is doing the worst version of my songs possible but thinking that they're doing it great, I will go to that bar, because I am fascinated with people who feel the music so much they have to express themselves. I don't go there and laugh. I go there and go, "Wow, that person has the balls to do this." I think it's magnificent, because they're choosing creativity and they're having a moment on that stage that they don't get to have in their everyday life. My career largely has been finding those kinds of people.

I am credited with discovering the Del Rubio Triplets. They were three identical triplets who, at the time that I

found them, were 75. They had huge blonde bouffant hair helmets. They wore miniskirts and go-go boots, all of which they made. They would have one martini a night, stitch all the costumes together, practice on a tiny toy organ that the keys had long been stuck together. They somehow could all hear the notes, even though nothing was playing, and they sang. "Three gals, three guitars" was their tag line. The guitar playing was terrible—out of tune, but completely in tune with each other. I'm around all these superstars, yet I never saw anyone get more joy out of playing music. Audiences would laugh because they're thrilled at how entertaining these women are, so they never thought that anyone was laughing at them. You just couldn't fucking believe what you were seeing. If they're known, they're usually known from *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. They were in the Christmas special and sang "Winter Wonderland" and "These Boots Were Made for Walking."

Their flyer said, "We do 375 different kinds of music," and I read through every one of them, but nothing was contemporary. At that time, I had a song called "Neutron Dance" by the Pointer Sisters from Beverly Hills Cop that was a hit. I was throwing the opening night party and I said, "I want to book you for this but I need you to play pop songs, rock and roll." And at first they didn't want to, they said, "We already know 375 styles." I said, "Yeah, but if you want a contemporary audience, you got to do these. Plus it's my party, and you have to play 'Neutron Dance.'"

And my dream came true of fusing together this aesthetic that I have of being interested in the very top and the very bottom. My dream moment in my taste for kitsch and for real deal stuff came together, because they started performing "Neutron Dance" with drum solos, banging on guitars—the treatment was insane. I start hearing screaming and see the crowds parting. I realize one of the Pointer Sisters is there and I go, "Oh my God, the worst performance of the song ever, which is brilliant as far as I'm concerned—the best performance of the song." And Ruth Pointer, who sang lead on "Neutron Dance," walks on stage and grabs that microphone away and makes them slow the song, because they were playing even faster than the record—and at that time, that record caused an aerobic revolution. I had my dream of verses being done by the real deal, choruses being done by what the fuck is going on. It was the perfect artistic moment of my career. I live for moments like that, because I see a huge relationship between the top and the bottom, and all it is is people having the guts to express themselves creatively.

There are things best left to professionals, but music shouldn't be one of those things. When music comes into the professional sphere expectations come into play.

Yeah, by committee.

Is there something you do to silence those naysayer voices?

Yeah, because I have nothing to do with the record industry. How I have ever had a hit, let alone sell so many records, is beyond me. I don't know record company presidents, I don't know A&R people. I enjoy the creative end of it. I do not enjoy the political end of it at all. It's taken me 30 years to actually consciously be aware of how I can stay happy. That's my total drive, and when left to my own devices lyrically, that's always what I'm talking about. How do you leave bad relationships? I don't care if they're love relationships, friendship relationships, relationship with yourself—if you're miserable, if you feel pressured, this is not a way to live. Unless you have a great relationship with yourself, you're tortured all the way through. So how do you learn to accept yourself? How do you learn to not put yourself down when something doesn't go right? This is the most important time in history for creative people, and for the creativity within you to emerge, because you have to find a way to deal with other people, find a space for you to be happy all the time. Not deal with people and then come home and go, "Phew, thank god. I'm home. I'm in my own little world." The whole world is your world, so find a way to make it better or get off the planet. There is certainly a part of me that worries, well, the planet will be destroyed, not just for environmental reasons but toxic mental environments. It's the single most important time for people to be creative in their life.

Creative action is joyful, but it's not always easy. For you, are the tribulations of the creative process also enjoyable—the hard work that it takes to get to the other end?

Yeah. I think what's very important for people to know is that being creative is oftentimes a very tortured

existence, but if you realize that and don't drive yourself nuts when you're having writer's block or the painting didn't come out right, it's all part of the process. I am someone who documents process. I'm more interested in the process than I am in the finished product. I want the finished product to be good, but I save every single inch of what it takes to write a song, what I went through to do a painting, writing a script, whatever, because it's fascinating to me, and I can see the points that I was stuck.

I became conscious of all this two years after my first hit in the tail end of 1978. By 1981, I was so miserable, because I wasn't happy writing. I was writing a lot of stuff I didn't care about because if you get a chance after you're on food stamps, which I was when "September" came out, and all of a sudden you can write with whoever you want, that leads to some really shitty writing. I was not aware at the beginning that it was dangerous to write things that you don't necessarily believe in. And it made me hate songwriting, which was extremely tortuous when I realized that's where I was at and that I was pulling back at a time when everything I had dreamed about as a songwriter was exploding in a great way. But I felt that if I kept working like that, I would be miserable. Music made me so happy, why am I driving myself to a place where it makes me miserable?

And so when that first happened, initially in 1981, it eventually led to me expressing myself in other ways. Originally it was painting. That just made me feel better, because I didn't know what rules to follow, which I didn't initially when I was writing music but you have a hit, and then you're very conscious—if you go too far this way, you are off the radio. I was so tortured, I went from being completely free to, if I don't get that right drum sound, the world is over. That's not a healthy way to live.

So from that point on, I was conscious, every time I went through a tortuous period, just, this is a big thing for you to discover about yourself. It probably took 20 years before I realized that getting into those types of uncomfortable spaces were incredibly important, because it eventually does drive you to a place where you come to peace with what you're doing. It gets easier and easier to deal with the periods that are frustrating. There are slow periods and there are hot periods, and I don't care which one I'm in, I need to be happy.

It seems like over time you learn that the goal is to be tuned in.

Because I've been conscious of it for almost 40 years now, I can feel when I'm about to hit the saturation point where everything I'm doing is going to make me miserable, afraid, conscious of needing a hit—all conditions that I don't do well under. So I think I just make an overall practice of being very careful about who I collaborate with. My days of writing with idiots just because they're famous are over. I'm obsessed with collaboration. It's about the exchange of ideas and that I don't like being tortured alone. I like to work with people I have a good time with, not where it's just 1,000% about the work. For me, collaboration always starts out with a discussion of, "What do we want to say? Tell me your personal experiences." I want to write something authentic.

I'm from Detroit. That is my main passion in the world, that city and what is inside of it, because they've had to put up with so much shit, with everyone around the world just writing Detroit off. When you go to Detroit you feel the creativity coming out of the ground—it's an incredible city for creative expression. It attracted a lot of artists who couldn't express themselves anywhere else. I think coming up in Detroit has a lot to do with my attitude anyway. It is the creativity that saved that city.

I need people around me who are stimulating, hopefully going through some of the things I am, can freely talk about them, and who bolster my life. That's what I need to be around.

You seem to create a happiness ecosystem through your work, your life, your community. And you hear that in the music that comes out the other end, which seems like a good product of the state you create.

Yeah. I used to view myself as a ballad writer, and when I look back on my greatest hits, there's only one ballad in there. All the rest are bouncy, but a lot of them with very serious messages. That's one thing I realized early on. You could take a very serious topic and put it into an upbeat song. Your message is getting across, maybe not even in a way that the people listening to it are conscious of. People always come up to me and say, "Oh my god, I love 'Boogie Wonderland.'" It is such a happy song." And I go, "Have you ever listened to the lyrics?"

I wrote it with Jon Lind and I had just seen the Diane Keaton movie *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. She is in agony with her entire life. This was at the height of the disco craze, still my number one favorite kind of music. I will proudly defend disco and marching bands 'til the day I die. She goes out every night, picks up a different guy, brings them home to escape her everyday problems. She goes into this fantasy world by entering this space where everyone's dancing and music is very uplifting. But she's actually someone on the brink of suicide.

That's what "Boogie Wonderland" is about. It's actually really dark, it's, "Midnight creeps so slowly into hearts of men who need more than they get. Daylight deals a bad hand to a woman who's laid too many bets. The mirror stares you in the face and says, 'Uh-uh, baby, it don't work.' You say your prayers, though you don't care. You dance to shake the hurt." The chorus is almost a bipolar mood swing from depression into, "All the love in the world can't be gone. All the need to be loved can't be wrong. All the records are playing, and my heart keeps saying, 'Boogie Wonderland.'"

To us, Boogie Wonderland was a mental state that you enter to escape your problems. I like to always be in "Boogie Wonderland," but I want to get there from a healthy pursuit of it, as opposed to turning your life off, dancing for two hours, feeling great, walking back out into the world, and then feeling miserable again.

You have to strive for healthy ways to express yourself and live in that positive state you create. Being an artist is hard work, but it's also one of the greatest things to be.

Most fulfilling, if you find a way to be happy doing it.

Allee Willis Recommends:

The Del Rubio Triplets

The Boogaloo Wonderland Sandwich at Chef Greg's Soul 'N The Wall in Detroit

Ronan the sea lion, who dances exclusively to my "Boogie Wonderland"

The Madonna Inn - San Luis Obispo California

Any book by Pema Chödrön

Name

Allee Willis

Vocation

Songwriter, performer, artist, director, producer, collector, party thrower

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