On songwriting, poetry, and making space for something new

Songwriter JD Souther on the origins of his creative practice, throwing out the idea of genre snobbery, and the ways in which poems and songs can share a common sensibility.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2636 words.

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What do you think it is that makes you particularly well-suited for being a songwriter?

I don't know. It certainly doesn't match the background of any of my peers. I was a classical music student, and then I was a jazz player for years. I started with violin in the fourth grade, playing in orchestras, and then wanted to play tenor sax because I was crazy for jazz, but it was a pretty big instrument for me at the time. I was a pretty small kid. So I learned the clarinet instead, because it's the same keys and the same fingering, and then a couple years later I just sort of transferred it over to tenor sax. In middle school I discovered drums and that was pretty much my entire life until I moved to California. And after. In fact, I played drums on a couple of my albums later on. It's probably the only instrument I play well.

Really? I did not know that about you. At what point did you realize that you had an aptitude for songwriting?

Well, it's kind of a crooked line. I was playing in a couple of bands in California after I moved there. Norman Greenbaum and I had a band, and I played in a blues band for a while—I played drums for a blues singer, but all the people that were my age were playing acoustic guitars. That's just the crowd I sort of fell in with first. I didn't know that many young jazz players in Los Angeles. My father had a music store—that was our life growing up, we had a family music store—so I went home and got a Gibson Dove from my dad's music store and started plunking around on it.

One of the first songs that I wrote was actually on the country charts. It was kind of a fluke. But still, I was just struggling. It was a lot easier to run around Los Angeles with a guitar than it was to drag around a set of drums, so the guitar became my default. None of us were making any money, anyway, so I figured I might as well be hanging out with people I liked that were fairly literate and trying to write songs. And there were always a lot of pretty girls around. It was just the crowd I fell in with. I've been writing poetry since I was a little kid and reading poetry as long as I can remember, so it just felt natural.

I've never really become a great guitarist or a great pianist. I can think of a lot of stuff and I can chart it, I can sort of struggle my way through to show other people what to play, and I can play well enough to accompany myself, but I just was never going to be a great player and I could see that. But I could also tell that songwriting was the way forward for me. If Linda Ronstadt starts recording your new songs, and if Bonnie Raitt and the Eagles want to write with you, that's what you do. I mean, it was pretty clear that that was what was going to work out best. I certainly couldn't live the way I lived by just being a drummer.

So, like I said, I think it had more to do with the crowd I fell in with, and then that sort of squeaked it out

of me. I suppose it was there all along, but it was an acquired profession. I didn't set out to be a songwriter, although I always adored very good songwriting.

Your story is legendary because you came up with this insane group of peers who all went on to have amazing, huge careers. Everybody was kind of working with each other or inspiring each other, collaborating in different ways. How important was it to have that kind of creative community around you?

Well, it's less important now. Everyone eventually moved to someplace different. Glen Frey had been living in New York for a few years when he died. And Don Henley lives in Texas and Linda lives in San Francisco. We're all sort of spread out to the far corners anyway. But yes, that period of time was probably unique. Now, I keep meeting young musicians who will say to me, "God, I wish I lived in California in the '70s, it must have been so cool." To us, it was just everyday life. Also, we were all pretty fiercely competitive, particularly Frey and Henley and myself.

Writing songs in that group was not exactly a love circle. A bad idea was met with stony silence. For a pretty good idea, somebody might go, "All right". For a *very* good idea, Frey might say, "I think we could use that". And even with an excellent idea, Don just mostly made faces and offered corrections. He's such a literate guy and he's so precise about language. But Glen, we used to call him Greg-a-rious because he was so outgoing about everything, and so demonstrative. But if it was a really good idea, then he'd do this peace sign with both hands. But when we all wrote together there would be hours of this difficult back and forth. Someone would put forth a line, and the other two guys, silence, or maybe "Hmm," which basically meant, you're an asshole, don't bring that up again.

Your career has been interesting in that you've made music and worked in all these different milieus of music. People might always associate you with some sort of '70s California rock, but is the jazz world really your home at this point?

It always felt more comfortable in one way. In another way, every sort of genre—god, how I *hate* that word—every kind of music seems to have its own sort of snobbery. And frankly, it's almost beyond comprehension to me because I grew up listening to Frank Sinatra or opera, because my father's mother was an opera singer. She was a gorgeous soprano, who also played Bach on an organ. She was quite a musical influence. So I either heard opera or classical music or big band jazz, which my dad and I both were avid fans of.

My parents couldn't stand country music, so there was no country music in our house until I discovered it on my own. But I really am always a little bit baffled about people feeling superior about their taste in music, or about doing one kind of music over another. I think the best musicians have always had a pretty open mind. Miles Davis thought George Jones had an amazing voice. Charlie Parker loved country music because he loved the stories. The Beatles, you can't get any whiter than McCartney and Lennon, but they grew up playing American rhythm and blues which, if you really want to be honest about it, came out of the Jim Crow era in the south. So to me, it's all just a big wheel that spins around, and the fact that it's so richly textured and so multicolored is what makes it the best playground to be in.

So I don't get it when musicians act like jazz is just some sort of noise they don't understand, or classical people act like pop music is beneath them, or when jazz musicians act like guys who only play three chords are stupid. None of it makes any sense to me. If Muddy Waters is as important as Miles Davis, and he probably is, then everybody should just chill.

Your most famous songs were all mostly made famous by other people. Was that ever a weird thing to reckon with?

It is a weird thing. People tend to be more educated about the flow of income and people meeting their own emotional needs in their own way than they once were, but there was definitely a period of time where people would occasionally say to me, "Doesn't it piss you off that the Eagles have these big hits off your songs?" I would usually start saying, "Would you like to see the checks?"

Pissed off? How could I be pissed off? Even Glen Frey once said—and he was kind of joking because he knows how

the royalty thing works—but he said, "One of the reasons JD didn't have a bigger solo career is because he gave us or Linda Ronstadt most of his best songs." And that's sort of true. The closest I got to being really famous was during the "You're Only Lonely" period, and I really didn't like it that much, frankly. It's a relief in some ways, though it also doesn't pay quite as well.

There's a part of me that's absolutely happy with the fact that I'm sitting here on my old farm, watching my dogs play, and that Don Henley is on the road with The Eagles right now somewhere in Europe. But he's also being paid really well to be on the road in Europe with The Eagles, and I'm being paid less well to sit here on my farm and watch my dogs run around in the field.

But I don't know how I would deal with it the other way around. I always try to be grateful. My father was very insistent on having good manners when people approached me or complimented me or something. But I like the fact that I don't get made up before I go out of the house or check to be sure my hair looks great. I've got on these beat-up old boots right now and some Levi's with a hole in the knee. I don't really want to be stopped when I'm in the grocery store and have somebody pay a bunch of attention to me. I'll be nice if that happens, but it's not what I want.

How do you find that your creative practice has changed over the years? I know that you write poetry, but you don't seem too concerned with sharing it with the world.

I still haven't published my poetry. I've had a lot of encouragement from my friends who are poets, but I would say that in most ways, I've just gotten lazier. It sort of comes and goes in waves. My right hand is broken right now, so I haven't been very encouraged to try and play guitar. But I'm in the process of planning a move, so I've been going through boxes and boxes of unfinished lyrics and poems. I'm finding some really good stuff. While looking at these things, I am reminded that there is great value in revision. It's a hard lesson for me to learn because I hate going back and reworking things over and over again, but the fact is that the most successful songs I ever wrote, the ones that were the biggest hits and the most financially successful, were pretty much all songs that we chewed on for months—taking lines out, putting them back, improving this, changing that. I think it's like making a quilt or something. You just don't cover all the territory until you've put in the time.

I also like to encourage people to understand that none of us know what we're doing, and that in some way we all start with the same blank page every morning. Lawrence Ferlinghetti always says that any act of poetry is an act of sedition. It sort of is. You're sort of flying in the face of everything that makes practical sense. As a matter of fact, it's usually a disappointing poem if you've turned everything into some sort of practical sensibility. What you really want is some sort of a nagging feeling that you need to read it again.

And what is your creative practice like now? Do you mostly write alone?

I don't know, to be honest. However, I can tell you one thing about writing that's consistent with me. I have a little writing porch, and it faces the sunrise—a screened-in porch with a little heater. It feels like a small place. The rest of the house is big and the land is big and it's a real high-ceilinged place. It's basically a huge log cabin, cut up into some rooms. So if I'm sitting where I am now in the great room—it really is a great room. The peak of the ceiling is 21 feet. It has a very expansive feel to it, but when I sit on my little writing porch on the east side of the house, it just feels like it's me and the sunrise and the little oil space heater. I'm much more likely to get something done out there, and I'm also much more likely to be able to read it later, as opposed to something that I sit up in the middle of the night and go, "Oh shit, I got an idea," and have to write it down. I hate that.

I literally loathe the job of songwriting and poetry when I get one of those ideas just as I'm drifting off. Because I'm an insomniac, it's hard for me to sleep anyway, so if I'm really sort of in never-never land and then I just get something in my head that says, "You better write this down, you'll forget it!" I'm just pissed off. All right, fuck it, I'll turn the light on, goddamn it, wake all the dogs up. *Here's the paper, oh this pen's out of ink, oh for Christ sake, I've got to get out of bed…*and then the next day I might not even be able to read what I've scribbled down.

The discipline of getting up early is just frightfully hard for me. I was never up early for school. I was never on time. I don't think I would have ever gotten out of bed if I didn't smell my mother cooking bacon and eggs in the morning. However, if I actually get up early and hit that little porch and open one of my tablets and I've got a good supply of pencils out there, *something* is going to happen. It might not be great every day and, in fact, if it is great every day, you're crazy. Because it's never great every day. The routine is just about making room for something good to happen, and the trick is to actually have the pen in your hand when the idea hits.

There's a great book called ***Writing the Australian Crawl*** by William Stafford. It's one of the best books about writing poetry. He compares the beginning of a poem to starting a car on ice. Which I think is pretty accurate. I don't know if I actually know what that means, but somehow I know exactly what it means. That's poetry. It makes its own kind of sense. Songs are that way too. There's great poetry in Shakespeare and most of it makes sense, but some of the most absolutely enchanting soliloquies don't make any sense at all. They contain lines in them that stretch the language well beyond how it could be spoken in everyday life. That's the great thing about it. The only poems that I can think of that make literal sense are the ones that are the most abjectly damaged, like Bukowski or something. In fact, Bukowski is a perfect example. There's so much damage and pain and wreckage in that guy's poems that he can afford to actually just talk the way he talks. It just spills out, like *Finnegan's Wake* or something. It's a fantastic mess.

Name
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Vocation
Songwriter, Poet