

On revisiting old ideas



Songwriter Rose Melberg (The Softies, Tiger Trap) discusses surrendering to the audience, saving the good elements from a bad work of art, and what she hopes will happen to her music when she dies.

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As told to Quinn Moreland, 1604 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Success](#), [Process](#), [First attempts](#).

You co-own a cat supply shop. How has working a more traditional job fed your creativity?

For most of the last 30 years I managed to stay busy with creative pursuits. I've certainly had jobs, but nothing that I wasn't willing to quit to go on tour. There was quite a learning curve with finding a balance between a normal job and creating, but the timing was such that the pandemic started nine months into [starting] my business. So it was all then nothing with music. It softened the blow of losing the ability to play shows, and for a couple of years I was just doing the job. I think that was really good for me because I didn't have a lot of practice being part of capitalism. It was a harsh toke but it taught me a lot about the value of my time and how to find creative inspiration in my day-to-day life. It reminded me that songs are everywhere.

Also, having a store, I get more human interaction than I ever have in my life. I've had so many lovely conversations with strangers over the last five years, and that in itself is a boiling pot of inspiration soup. People want to tell their stories and I want to listen. Reciprocity is one of the most important things about being an artist, to me.

Has it always been important?

No, I had a lot more anxiety when I was young. I was a lot more shy and insecure. It was a process over 30 years of learning how to let myself be vulnerable and to trust people, not only with *my* story but to trust that I can handle whatever they have to tell me. I'm in a way better place to give and receive, and that's from years of therapy. I love it now. It's now very meaningful to interact with people at Softies shows, as much as I feel comfortable with.

What have other people's perceptions of your music revealed to you?

When I write, I'm telling a really big story in my mind, but I try to do it with economy. I leave a lot out but hope that enough is infused in the song. It is consistently surprising to me how I can be really vague about my intentions in a song and people will still see between the lines. I've learned that people will hear what you're putting in it and that has led to me trusting listeners more. As an artist, it's been amazing how much that's expanded my craft.

Is there any part of your songwriting process that you feel very precious about?

Lyricism is very important to me. Pop songwriting is this beautiful framework of possibility. It's about packing the most emotion and imagery into a two-and-a-half minute song, so how do you use those limited measures or

syllables? Intention is important to me—every single line should be something you stand behind.

By those standards, your early songs are considerably more wordy.

I hold back a little bit more now. Back then I was more free but I also had a lot to say. I wanted every line to feel *full* of something. I still love those songs because in the craftsmanship I can see my growth in this really sweet, linear way as I learned how to write songs and discovered what intuitively felt right to me.

Here's the way I see my own relationship to songwriting: I've been a music fan since I was so young, and I was precocious. I know what I love; I know what sounds good to me. But there's a disconnect between the sophistication of how I hear and think about music and my musical abilities and training. That place in between is where I create my music, and it's this beautiful liminal space where it's almost a dissonant clashing. I'll never take a music lesson, so everything I know is from 30 years of playing.

I don't make music, but in my experience it can be really scary to believe in yourself from that place.

But what you end up with is something that, thank god, doesn't sound like someone else. It's the thing that only you could make. And isn't it cool when your best is kind of interesting? You tried to do something and you didn't achieve it, but what you ended up with was maybe something unique. I often say that about my first band, Tiger Trap: we didn't know what we were doing. We ended up with something really unique and special because we literally didn't know how to do anything else. I'm still kind of living in that space.

Tiger Trap was getting attention from major labels after a well-received debut [in 1993]. Instead, you decided to break up the band. How do you feel about that decision today?

There's a song on the new Softies album about that decision, "[When I Started Loving You](#)." The refrain is, "My life started when I started loving you." That band was my dream come true, it was my everything, but it was a great act of self-love to leave it. That was the first time I had done anything like that for myself, and, truly, my life started when I learned to prioritize myself and my mental health. I feel really proud of myself.

How do you define success for yourself today?

When I was young and starting my journey with punk and independent music, I internalized the idea that selling out is the worst thing you could do. I still feel that way today, to some extent. The music industry is such a pit of horrible darkness and misogyny and all these awful things. So to me, success meant continuing to make music [while] having the respect of my peers and community, and maintaining my dignity. I had opportunities to sell out a couple times. I couldn't have done it; it never would have felt true. Punk is speaking to truth and and never pandering to other people's ideas of who you were supposed to be. That's basically all the music industry asks of women: to constantly pander to an idea of what it means to be a female musician, or where you *fit* in culture. I was just like, "I don't really fit anywhere, so I'm just going to find this little pocket of a community where I feel safe."

I have a unique perspective on living as a musician because of the way I was raised—my parents were professional musicians. They worked four nights a week, playing bars, playing weddings, and doing recording sessions. The pursuit of making music didn't have a "fame" end game. It was a job; it was a fulfilling way of life.

You have released so much music over the years. Have you ever put anything out and felt like the response wasn't commensurate with the heart and energy you put into making it?

Some of my music is more visible or accessible but it's all the same to me. It's all part of this larger arc of my life's work. I've made 18 or 19 albums and people maybe know eight of them, but that doesn't make the other ones any less important. All I want after I die is for there to be an amazing box set. I want people to find the work that maybe didn't rise to the top. It's not up to me to tell people that or to rank my own music in the order of importance. Surrendering to the whimsies of the listening world is a beautiful part of being an artist.

You might get one song in a movie that a million people hear, but you made a way better song that only a couple thousand people heard. You get to sit back and wait for people to find it.

As a prolific songwriter, how much is in the archives?

Not a lot. If I write something that I think is good, I'm gonna find a way to put it out. There are a few songs that other people maybe would have liked, but I have to love it. Never throw away an idea. You can map every song back to its first elemental idea—so even in a song that maybe doesn't come out the way you wanted it to, that little spark of magic that made you want to build a song is still there. Sometimes I'll revisit those or remember that I had an intention or maybe just one good line and find a way to work it into something else.

There's a Ron Sexsmith song with a line that goes, "For every song you ever heard/ How many more have died at birth?" It goes along with the idea that a lot of artists have, that you have to just create, create, create. For every 10 bad songs you write, you'll write one really great one. But I'm always of the mind that in those 10 supposedly bad songs, there are elements of something wonderful.

Rose Melberg recommends:

The new Kacey Musgraves album (QUEEN)

Grilled green olives from Trader Joe's (we don't have Trader Joe's in Canada so I stock up when I'm down).

Local independent wrestling events (BOOM! Wrestling in Vancouver is so fun). Find out what's happening in your town!

22 Degree Halo Lily of the Valley album (big beautiful feelings)

Serpentwithfeet live (KING)

Name

Rose Melberg

Vocation

musician, songwriter

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