

Somi on trusting your own voice and making your own model



An interview with Somi about how her childhood fantasy led her to a career as a professional singer, and why you should always take creative risks—even with your business model.

July 4, 2018 -

As told to Willa Köerner, 2936 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#), [Identity](#), [Promotion](#), [Business](#).

How did you know you wanted to be a musician? Was there a key moment when you just knew that this was what you'd do with your life?

I think there were two moments for me. The first one was at a very young age. I was always charmed by the gift of song, and by performers. But I didn't know that that was an option for me, because I didn't have any professional artists in my life. The way I was raised—and I think this is probably typical of most first-generation immigrant families—you're not encouraged to be an artist. You're encouraged to take a more "traditional" path and be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or an educator of some sort.

My parents encouraged my love of the arts, but I think in their mind they were just making me a well-rounded human being, and saying sure, you can play cello and go off to creative writing camp and all of that. But they weren't saying I could be a professional artist. So for me, the fantasy of being an artist began at a very, very young age. But it was always a thing that I didn't think was tangible or attainable. It was just this dream, or this fictitious version of myself.

Beyond that, I don't know that I ever had a really concrete moment where I was like, "This is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life." After college, I suddenly had a year off to work before going into a doctoral program. I was like, "Look, if I can choose what this year is, perhaps this is my time to lean into the fantasy of being a singer. Just to see what it is." So I moved to New York, and I began this very deep, committed, and sustained exploration of my own heart. And I just felt like small things kept affirming that path.

After that first year of exploring, once it was time to go back to school in pursuit of my original plan (medical anthropology), I said to myself, "You know what? There are all of these things that keep telling me that this is the right path." There were all these things that just felt right, you know? It really was an intuitive, organic journey. And it continues to be.

I consider myself to be multifaceted in terms of how I articulate myself in the world, and through my creative practice. At this point, whatever I do, I now know that I'm committed to being in the arts and to expressing my heart in a creative way. But, I don't know that I've ever actually had that one moment where I was like, "This is it, guys."

Once you started pursuing the dream of becoming a singer, was it scary to make the decision not to go back to school?

Well, I decided not to go to school for anthropology, but I *did* end up going back to graduate school to study performance at Tisch. In some ways, that was me trying to find a middle ground, right? Because performance studies—at least the way it was branded when I first began to explore it—is an anthropological look at performance. I remember the department chair at the open house being like, "This program has one foot in dance, and one foot in anthropology." I was like, "Oh my god, this is my tribe."

More than anything, that program armed me with a certain critical lens through which to talk about my work, and to look at other work—to explore it in a more meaningful way. And I actually think that, especially in recent years, I've arrived at a place where my work really reaches to all of those different types of training and interests. I write my own albums as song cycles, and as these anthropological surveys of place. It's been an organic discovery of process, of self, and of my voice as an artist, in terms of how I want to tell the stories I'm trying to tell.

It's interesting to find out that you studied anthropology. It makes sense, because while your music is beautiful just as music, it also feels like a piece of living history with a message to share. How do you balance the musicality in your work with the storytelling aspects?

You know, I'm interested in challenging myself. Because I grew up with that first-generation American-immigrant family narrative, there's always this longing to fit into some sort of box. It's this realization that you are always in the in-between—in this liminal kind of gray space. And while it may feel very clear to me where I fit in, to everybody else there's always been this, "Where do you

fit? What box do you check?"

In terms of balancing musicality with storytelling, it's that same kind of constant improvisation that I've always had to do with my own construction of identity. I don't know that I have a particular formula or a method, really. I remember having a conversation with my brother where I was like, "I'm just trying to get to this one sound in which you can hear all of it. Like, you can hear Illinois and Harlem and Lagos and Paris. You can hear all of those influences in this one thing." And he was like, "But..." So we had this really interesting conversation about tension, and about how it's okay to stand in the tension. And to understand that you may never actually arrive at that one thing.

So I don't think there's a formula or particular process I follow to get to this perfect or imperfect balance between sound and storytelling. I think all we can do is be honest. That might sound corny. But at the end of the day, we just have to try our best to tell the truth, you know? About others, about the stories we're bearing witness to and trying to put into a song, or a play, or whatever it is that we're making. To be honest to the people that we're bearing witness to, and be honest with our own hearts.

Obviously, there are certain things I try to be aware of in terms of sonic aesthetics that might lend a piece of music to a larger story. For example, my most recent album, *Petite Afrique*, is a song cycle about Harlem and the large, longstanding African immigrant community there. It's about the dignity of African immigrants in this country, and specifically in this neighborhood, and about how they're negotiating the climate of xenophobia and Islamophobia, as well as the gentrification of their neighborhood.

And so, one of the things that was really important to me was thinking about, "How do I honor what Harlem means to African people, and what African people mean to Harlem?" This brought on questions of how I could privilege the jazz idiom, and so I made a choice to really lean into a lot of modern jazz aesthetics, so that I'm actually saluting a particular storyline.

All this to say, there are certain moments in which I'll make very specific aesthetic choices sonically, just to make a statement inside of the music. But, overall, it's just about what feels honest.

When we met, I remember you telling me about how much traveling you do when you're on tour. How you stay focused, healthy, and sane when you're traveling so much?

I try to have a meditative, quiet stretch of time every morning. When I don't find time to do that is when I feel less centered. I try not to reach for my phone and look at email or social media or whatever in the morning. Instead, I try to just be quiet and spend time writing in my journal. This actually comes from the book "The Artist's Way," but I really believe in it. The morning pages idea was really a revolutionary thing for me, and is so helpful. Not only to center myself, but also as a way to create a muscle in ourselves to show up at the page, even when you don't feel like it.

Now when I do have deadlines and have to get something written, there's this muscle that I've been working on regularly, everyday. So, I think that's one thing that keeps me sane. It's so important to find quiet time for reflection, so we can explore our hearts and say whatever it is we need to say.

The other thing you mentioned was about staying healthy. For me, it's all about drinking water. It sounds simple, but if I'm on top of my water game, I feel better. Vocally, physically, all of it.

Overall, I have my good and bad moments. Like right now I can sit here and tell you, "Oh, I go to the gym anywhere from three to five times a week, and I have a trainer." But that's not always my answer. It's tricky, you know? This is sort of a side note, but what I am trying to do now is be less obsessive about my exercise routine. I'm trying to be gentle with myself, while still challenging my body physically.

It's a balance of self care, of being aware of what we put into our bodies, and how we use our bodies. It's about finding that middle ground, and it's always a work in progress.

In terms of balance, I'm curious about how you avoid burning out. When new opportunities arise, how you decide whether to say yes or no to something?

When you have the option of saying no, it's important to keep in mind that that is a gift. It's a wonderful problem to be like, "You know, I'm too busy." I always want to say yes to an opportunity. At this point, I've come to a place where I look at a range of things to decide if I can say yes. Obviously an opportunity has to make economic sense. And, I have to think about really clinical things, like, "What's my presence in that market? How does that support the larger goals that I have for myself and my career?"

If it doesn't make sense economically and time-wise, it's okay to say no. It's also okay to plant ourselves deeper in one place, if that makes sense. We can lean into where we already are. Also, sometimes I can say yes, even without the idea of the market in mind. That's because other things are also important. Collaborations are important. Stretching out into different scenes is important. And those things all shift, right?

For me, there's one thing I've been intentionally saying yes to—even when the economics of it don't necessarily "make sense." At the

beginning of this year, I decided I was going to privilege the African market for creative music. There are a lot of fledgling jazz festivals and nascent cultural institutions that are trying to find their own footing in this really exciting new creative economy of the African continent.

So over the last few years, I've had to say no to a number of opportunities because it didn't make financial sense. Like, I can't bring five people with me and have a certain type of experience, travel-wise and performance-wise. But more recently, I've been trying to do my part to empower that scene. And often that means looking for funding on the side to be able to subsidize those offers as they come in. That's felt like more of a spiritual/cultural/personal investment, because those are the things that are important to me.

But normally, if it was the same offer in a market that didn't have as much personal importance to me, I think I would say no. I'm really trying to honor what feels most in line with who I am, and who the stories in my music are about and for. Or, by focusing on where those stories might make the most difference in terms of disrupting notions of other-ness.

It's interesting to hear you talk about balancing business objectives with the things you care about as a living, breathing person. How did you learn to navigate the more business-y aspects of the music industry?

It was such a hands-on, baptism-by-fire kind of process. I came into the music scene not knowing any of these things. I mean, in undergrad, if somebody asked me to take a marketing or economics class, I just was not interested in that stuff at all. I also hadn't realized how important those things were. But when I became an artist, I suddenly needed to get the word out about my music, do my taxes, and all those things. You just get to a point where you have to actually figure out a structure to sustain your practice.

Now, I've realized that the business aspects are not something I shy away from. I'm not bothered by the challenge of those things now. Maybe it's from being conditioned in a way, since I had to do those things myself for so many years when I was starting out. And now it's just second nature; it's just a part of the landscape of whatever anyone is trying to do.

So you just figured out the business aspects of your practice as you went along.

Right. But now I'm also a person who advocates for having that awareness earlier on. When other artists ask me for advice on being a professional musician, I always have to think about the advice I can give them from a business point of view. I think it's important that people realize how much the industry has changed. Especially right now, in this digital age, where there's so much noise. Everything is packaged in sound bytes and clips and videos, and there's so much information out there. Because of this, we have to really be intentional and strategic about how we're seen. I think there needs to be some humility in there, and not just have it be like, "Look at me, look at me."

The way you would just put out an album 10 years ago, versus right now—the type of work that's required is completely different. We have to think so much more about how to support the work that we're putting out, and it's so important for artists to show up for that side of the thing, and to really understand it. Not just to explore it, but to deeply understand this new business side of things. Because understanding it can only help. It won't hurt.

I'm curious, if you could go back five or 10 years and sneak yourself a piece of advice from the future, what that might be?

I think the main encouragement I'd give myself would be to trust that I can make my own model. I would say, "Take the same risks on the business side that you take on the creative side." It's important to know that one can make their own business model that is outside of the tradition of things, or the way other people do things.

I've taken a lot of creative risks in my career, which is great to look back on. At the time, I didn't look at them as risks, per se. In 2012, I picked up and moved to Nigeria. I had decided that the infrastructure I had around me at the time wasn't serving me, and I just didn't feel understood. Because of that, I stepped outside of that ecosystem and did my own thing. And it was deeply rewarding.

But there's always this temptation to come back into the industry, and follow the rules of how music is supposed to be shared, and how the artist's voice is supposed to be positioned, packaged, and distributed. The idea of that made me step back into the traditional way of making, creating, and sharing music, because it looked shiny and right. But now, I'm making a shift in terms of what a sharing and distribution model around my practice can be. I'm in a place where I've recognized that if I'm making work that doesn't fit into a particular box, then the model around how that work is supported should reflect that, too. My business model should be just as hyphenated, creative, and unable to be categorized as my music is.

And, if I were to have a heart-to-heart with a younger version of myself, I'd remember that it took me a really long time to truly believe that I can sing. Even saying it out loud right now, there's something uncomfortable in saying it. Part of that is because I would like to believe I'll always be a student, and that there's always room for growth. And, there's a larger version of what I'm doing that I hope to get to. But yeah, I'd tell myself to trust in my voice. And to trust that even when it feels like it's not fully there, that it will show up for you. And in showing up, you realize that it's always been there.

Somi recommends:

BOOKS:

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

ALBUMS:

Introducing Hedzoleh Soundz by Hugh Masekela

Makeba Sings! by Miriam Makeba

PLACE:

Zanzibar Island, Tanzania

Name

Somi

Vocation

Vocalist, Songwriter

