The Monthly Squeak

Issue 7
Sept.-Oct. '26



Featuring
in-depth
interviews
and opinions!

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Editor's Note

Happy beginnings of fall! This is my first fuller, lengthier, more current issue as publications editor, and I'm excited for the next one where I will finally have an assistant, Ash Dolan. As you'll see in the third interview, my actual dad is playing The Bower the 8th, so I hope you will consider attending, or at least reading his in-depth advice to young artists. I hope you all got to attend Madeline's exhibition, but if not, make sure to read her interview. Submissions are officially opening each month, and sometimes issues will bump up to twice per month! So make sure to get what you want to say out to a wider audience (or want to show, we accept art and fiction too). There's also a new paper, The Problem, which has just released their first issue, and has made a new, joint ecosystem of student publications! We have agreed to be cohorts, so please consider submitting to either, or ideally both of us, in the coming semester, depending on what ethos you think fits each work best. A part of my new position is also supporting any other students' publications, so consider whether you want to form your own club and organization, too. I am excited to see more of you contributing.

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Reflections in the Long Night



An Interview with curator **Madeline McGann,** conducted by Elliot MacDonald.

E: As a summary, what was the exhibition about?

M: The show explores this idea of in-between space, and where that space exists in the lives of queer and trans artists, wherever or whatever that may be. We are on different journeys that last for different reasons in our lives, and this applies to everyone. But I was interested in the lives of queer artists. It started because I was curious about the subcultural, contemporary phenomenon of liminal space, and why people are so drawn to that. It's really just an internet aesthetic, and I was curious about it through a queer theoretical lens, because I see queer experience, myself, as this in-between space that doesn't necessarily have a clear end. Or it's something that may be hard to see through, or you can't really see exactly where you're going, but you know that you're heading somewhere because there's somewhere that you need to go.

How I internalize the liminal space, sort of a subculture, is that these images that were posted on the internet are always of places that you're typically wedged between, like when you're going somewhere for whatever purpose. Even if it's, like, going shopping to the mall or to an airport, or a hallway in a video game. There's a lot of weird, dream-like imagery too, that often feels kind of melancholic or lost. And I've always felt a very intimate link with that, especially as a transgender person, because growing up, you don't entirely understand your body or your surroundings. But there are still these objects that you latch yourself onto, or you try to orient yourself to. One of the supporting texts for the show that I was reading was written by Sara Ahmed, called *Queer Phenomenology*. In it she defines orientations to point out the ways in which bodies come to take shape and reside in space based on objects or things, and that language is intentionally vague because phenomenology itself is something that is very personalized. It's based on your own individual or lived experience. Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of lived experience or desires, and how the environment or stories or narratives impact the way that we move in our lives. I wanted to explore identity, sexuality, the erotic, different states of consciousness, and how you just position yourself to the world.

E: It's about the queer experience, but a lot of the pieces seem nebulously or theoretically tied to that idea. What was the motivation for you to have this more abstract representation of what being queer is?

M: I was drawn to the abstractness because the source material that I was pulling from, of liminal space, is also a little abstracted. It is inherently direct, but there is an abstracted quality to it, or more an obscurity to it. It's like there's elements that are missing, or this obvious lack of context. There's this implication that there's more to the story than what you're actually seeing. I wanted works that had a story behind them, but to the viewer, it's not something that could be fully understood, just because of the nature of these experiences.

E: In your artist talk, you mentioned the word "ephemeral" as a major theme.

M: Yeah, ephemerality is pretty important to me, as a queer person, because it's something I think is worthy of embracing. It helps me to not hold myself back on living my life by accepting that these precious moments that we have in the now are temporary. The experiences that we've had, they're temporary, but they still find

ways to leave marks or an echo or something like that, and I think that's worth celebrating. And I think that's something that also draws a lot of us to art making, regardless of whether or not you're a queer person. It's to try and capture that or to breathe in that ephemera one more time, or to reflect on it, or to reconfigure it in a different way and come to a new understanding. I think the ephemera is something that's very beautiful, and that's because it's only here for a short amount of time.

E: There were a few pieces that touched on pre-transition or pre-coming out, and immortalizing that version of yourself.

M: A couple pieces like that. Some pieces are a little more overt. But I especially like Henry's piece for this reason. Whether it's about pre or in the middle of transition- actually, how far the transition is is not necessarily important. The piece is this big abstraction of various, what I like to understand as big emotions or feelings, that don't get to have the space to be fully felt or understood or recognized. Just put up into this projection in which Henry engages with materiality. So for Henry's piece, the act of him projecting this video piece that contains all this moving and bouncing imagery, with various shapes and colors, that abstracts the space. I think it's very intimate, because these are feelings that, again, often don't get to have the space that they deserve to be understood.



Henry Walls

One of the aspects that I was exploring is the nature of our lived space, like in our contemporary, Western society, especially in the way that gender norms or heteronormativity tries to manifest. It's in more ways than just a typical social setting, where we see people saying things because that space is gendered. Space is not a passive force, and that is something that I was also trying to explore in this show, and by gathering all these pieces into this space, I wanted the gallery itself to transform into one of belonging. Where these pieces can find room to breathe, or even, to quote Virginia Woolf, "a room of their own." I do like to think about what she was saying, the need of having a room of your own, and what that means as a queer person is something that's often very intimate and very private. Because, for the longest time in history, we have faced marginalization and senseless violence that has put us at a disadvantage against the heteronormative reality that a lot of us are facing.

E: In your curator's talk, somebody mentioned either catharsis or processing trauma. Does the art have that catharsis element to it?

M: Yeah, absolutely. I think that is what Ivy's piece was trying to address, by having a looping video of this train environment, of a space where the artist grew up in, so a childhood environment. It's very familiar. The piece is called "There Are No Walls," but in the video you see this looping image of the train passing by, and it doesn't seem to end. It just seems to keep going. I know that Ivy's piece in particular is very interested in representing or re-processing trauma, and trying to find how that becomes manifested into material form. Ivy's installation also contained a curtain that was obscuring the space, but at the same time, it constricted the space to make it feel closer or more intimate. I think the piece is asking for the viewer to be in this new space that has taken place when you step in, and allow the curtain and the wall to just encase you into this looping track.



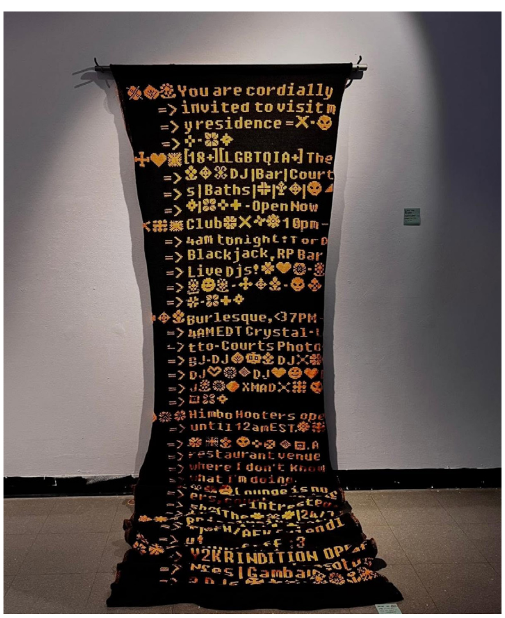
Ivy Howard

E: A lot of the pieces tie into origin or home life. Is that a part of the space aspect?

M: Absolutely. This goes back to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* because the entire thing is about orientations and how we find objects to latch onto, or rather, we have these objects in proximity to ourselves that exist in our psychological space. They influence our movements, and it matters which objects that you grab towards and move towards, compared to the ones that just sit in space around you. There are also objects that are inaccessible or pushed away for whatever reason, but they still remain in proximity to you and how you orient yourself to the world, to still put an impression on the way that you move. So, going back to how the pieces deal with childhood or home life, it considers what space we were inhabiting at that time.

I want to point out Clare's piece specifically about that because it really excites me in that regard. It's a chat record of various party and social space shoutouts for players of, I think it was Final Fantasy XIV, but it's an MMORPG. There's so many curious places on there, like bars, or mini golf, or bathhouses, or DJs and nightclubs, all these spaces that you would typically see in a city, urban environment. This space is instead harbored in this virtual video game. I think it's so fascinating, and there's a rich history of how queer individuals find their own spaces to congregate and to find and nurture community.

E: Do you think that the third, digital space has become an important part of modern queer history and how queer people find community?



Clare Tof Miryam

M: It definitely has left an impact, especially on the feminist movements, specifically with the early cyber feminists back in the '90s. Going into the 2000s, there was a big rush, that the internet space was this new horizon for queer and trans people to have an alternative setting to be themselves. Even in the early 2000s, there were thousands of websites already, like platforms like GeoCities. I think it's undoubtedly been an important element for discovery and play, but it is harder to become excited about that virtuality anymore, considering the state of the internet as it exists today, like post-digital colonialization which is something that was always bound to happen. But now that it's completely consumed, a lot of the UI and access has been destroyed, a lot of the connections that have previously nurtured these communities. But nonetheless, I was still curious about this element because I think it's important to recognize.

One of the more contemporary conversations, post the cyber feminist movements that I was reading into, was another important text for this show, called *Glitch Feminism* by Legacy Russell. It's a manifesto in which she writes about many different dimensions of the "glitch," which she uses as this term of empowerment for queer and black, female bodies, to reclaim an autonomy that has been taken, whether that's through violence or systemic injustices. And it celebrates the internet, or the virtual space, as this, like, cosmic space, where identity can really indulge in itself. She describes her internet avatar as a person that has lived and died through countless ages, where she's died and been reborn through different personas and characters. Even thinking about the digital space of video games and MMORPGs, like you're donning a different character and a different life. Bouncing through different identities and having that space where you're given freedom to explore, depending on what sort of platforms or software or whatever you're engaging in, and we still see this very much today. Games like VR Chat, even Minecraft, Roblox, despite how corporate and capitalistic it's become, were still an example of a place where identity could be played with.

E: There's a few pieces that talk about the concept of loss, like somebody documenting the illness of their partner or someone documenting their past self.



Tynan Byrne

M: Losses, and estrangement too, is something that is very relevant to the lives of queer and trans people. There's two good examples of these pieces. One is Tynan's, because he talked about the documentation of his partner when he was going through this very devastating medical scare. I was really drawn to that piece specifically because I think it highlights this sometimes horrible reality, that a lot of us are just one injury or one bad day away. The human body itself is something that is very ephemeral. I think it's easy to forget that, and I also just think it's heartbreaking considering the loss, or even just the fact that your partner is no longer as able-bodied as they were. There's that rapid change, and now you're thrust into this new position. Going back into this idea of the in-between space, you're now put in this new position where you don't know, you can't see the end. It's hard to gauge exactly where it's heading, and there can be real loss behind that, whatever that manifests into the relationship or the lives of those that were affected.

Then you have Jake's piece, which is this bare-bones sculpture, made as a representation of his dreams, or nightmares, rather. I kind of see them as both. In Jake's work, he's very open about the fact that he was raised in this Christian, conservative religious household, in which identity or his selfhood was suppressed. His identity and his potentiality was suppressed due to his environment. And I feel like the objects in his surroundings at the time must have felt very limiting and maybe even a little alienating, as they're not in line with his authenticity. So I reflect on that, looking at the materiality of that sculpture, because it's just simple materials. It's wood and wire, and there's also pieces of wood inside the hollow body that's sitting on the chair, and it's made out of papier-mâché with this bare expression. It's this implication that something was there, but there's so many elements to it that are stripped away or stripped down. Again, you get the sense that there's something more, but what's being shown to you is very obscuring to reality, which may also reveal that very reality. I think the lack of representation is exactly the representation I was going for for some of these works.

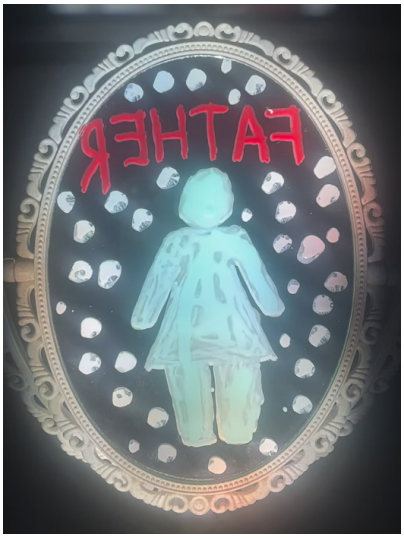


Jake Wanamaker

E: We talked a bit about the more serious aspects of queer life, but I think there's also pieces that feel appreciative.

M: It's definitely important to recognize aspects of celebration, and love and enjoyment, and real community warmth. That's why I was really excited about Clare's piece, because it is such a new-age representation of virtual queer spaces. There's still so much life to it, despite being reduced to a screen. I wanted to celebrate that space in the show, specifically, because it is a space that can be really empowering to people. To be given a space free of identifiers and margins, and being shoved into some idea of yourself when you're just trying to play around and figure out what you want. Frankie's piece, I don't know how celebratory it is but it is definitely playful, with all the distorted mirrors. Frankie's work has a tendency to make lightheartedness out of her subject matter, like queer trauma, because her piece dives into traumatic childhood experiences. Frankie was raised in this Catholic environment as well. In the work, there's an energy and playfulness that's a little childish and whimsical. A lot of the symbols being reconfigured are heteronormative, gendered symbols. On two sides of one mirror were those two gender symbols, one of male and female that you'd see going to the bathroom, but she had the roles of parental figures swapped, so that on the woman figure there was "father" and on the male figure there was "mother".

She's doing it in this way where she's like, "I don't give a fuck," it's really unapologetic and expressive. I think she's celebrating our differences, in a way that keeps the energy in a positive light. It's important to not be beaten down by all these arbitrary factors, and to find strength and empowerment.



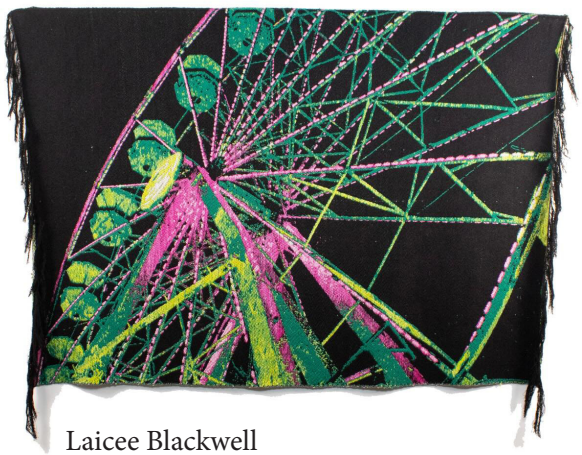
Frankie Symonds

E: When you have big concepts that you're looking for, how do you select pieces?

M: The stage of going from ideas to selecting artworks was a tough one, but it was very important because it helped me ground the show into something a lot more tangible and accessible to consume. I was looking for work that was related to a lot of the more critical queer theory I was dealing with. One of the texts that I don't really reference too much, but was important to its original becoming, was Jose Esteban's *Cruising Utopia*. That is a lengthy read that I didn't get to finish, but it's a very compelling text that was published a little over a decade and a half ago. It oriented queerness with a futuristicness.

I had a lot of theories to work with, but the problem for me was connecting those ideas to artwork. The thing that I had to realize, in my own vision, was that the ideas I was looking at were maybe a little too esoteric, and a little hard to materialize into form. I think I could have done it, and that with a lot more time and research I could have found some pieces. But for my first show, toning down my vision was ultimately what helped me find the artworks. A lot of the artworks ended up coming through an open call that I sent out, through a gallery newspaper and also through social media and flyers posted around the Boston area and school. I ended up choosing works that dealt with an element of queer experience, whatever that was. It was a very open definition by this point. But I was really interested in what kind of material they were using, and why. Like I said before, materiality was something I was really considering, and this was a theme that came about after reading and trying to organize all of that theory. I like to interpret the *Queer Phenomenology* back into art making, and ask myself, "why this material? Why did this artist choose this material and this process?"

There's a lot of unique processes that were included in this show. For example, one of the big tapestries, the landscape oriented one of the ferris wheel, was a digital photo that was then turned into a physical weaving, and I was curious about that. I found out that the reason why was that there was a virtual aspect to it, because the piece is about this childhood memory in which the artist feels this, like, sadness or longing for a space that could have been more inclusive to her, as a queer person, but wasn't. So she's reminiscing on the experiences that she could have had, with these bright, saturated, computery colors. When it's presented in this material, it's something that's very time indulgent and considered. It makes you sit with the work and that grief. I think there's a real subject of queer grief, especially trans grief. As a trans woman, I've felt like there are just a lot of things that I grieve, just because of the nature of my existence in the world. You're kind of thrown into this idea of what your life should be like, when you're fighting with what you want but you don't actually know what that is, and it just throws you into this whirlwind of confusion that can take years to reorganize and understand. When you finally recognize and realize these things, it's like, "wow, that time can't come back anymore."


Laicee Blackwell

E: What did you learn about the curation process, since this was your first show?

M: Before this, I did get a decent opportunity to help out my friend, Pierro, when he was curating The Self Imagined. So I got a good glimpse into what the process looks like for selecting art works, and for outreach as well. But I think the thing that I learned the most was enacting a curator's responsibility myself. I learned the whole process of the show, from conceptualizing, to research, to re-synthesizing and editing down, then finding the artwork and then realizing that the artwork also defines the show, just as much as what you're writing about. It taught me to be more realistic with what to expect, because that's also something that happens as an artist. I give myself these big expectations and then reality happens, and naturally these things change. I'd never really had an opportunity to work with that many artists in this time frame, in this position of power as the curator where I was the one organizing. It was a very eye-opening experience, to have that power and responsibility.

E: Is there any advice you have to people interested in curation?

M: Two things. One, don't be afraid to use your voice. That was a lesson for me, for this project, and something that I'm just working on as a person. There was a responsibility to align with the artwork and be respectful, but don't be afraid to use your voice. Voices are what we need to hear now. Secondly, be open to change, or to new ideas. I think if we take a minute to step back, you can learn another thing or two from the artwork that you're working with. It's easy to have this idea of the artwork in your head, especially when you're trying to put it into the show, and then you install it and get to listen to the artists talk about the work, and your own horizons open up based on what they have to say.

One of the artists I was going to have in the show, but dropped out due to life things and stuff like that, had this amazing piece about bodily experience and dealing with medical trauma. They had this floor installation of wooden boxes that had a screen to it, and each screen had a little transparent image with a light behind it. They were zoomed in to different parts of the body and the lights were on a repetitive loop to mimic someone's breathing. I really wish this piece was in the show.

E: Can you explain the title of the show?

M: The show was named Reflection of the Long Night because it was always revolving around these ideas of movement and drifting, and also reconfiguration and putting something into a new light. I imagine these acts of art making and processing different experiences like looking over this big, calm lake in the middle of the night, where the entire universe is reflected onto it. Just sitting with these narratives and the results of them, and what the artists feel, what the artwork is trying to express. I like that imagery of the lake because it goes back into one of the last bits of theory text that I'll mention, this one word that was theorized by Guy du Bois, which dérive. It's French for drift. Guy du Bois coined this term as this slow, methodical kind of movement, which originally was theorized as an action to wander around your urban setting or your city and how that geography comes to impact you in the ways that you move. Once again, it's what Sara Ahmed was talking about, these things in space. Thinking about spatial structures, walls, collisions, the ways that space is divided to break people up or to try and divert movement. It's a river stream going down some long plane, and so I really like that aquatic symbology because water is also, to me, a very reflective and considerate element.

Naturally, on top of that, is the long night, long signifying that this is a long period of time, how often these experiences can feel, for whatever reason, and the fact that a lot of this space or these journeys are typically hidden, whether purposefully or not. These are journeys that a lot of people on the outside don't see, and there's always been celebration for queer life in the night time, because that's typically where they're able to congregate and be themselves. I was using the phrase long night to try and reference that intimate, internal space.

THE PHILOSOPHIC DEBATES OF "STRONG AI"



Can Robots Be Sentient?

by Elliot MacDonald

The most famous robot sentience test is the Turing Test, from 1950, where a man asks questions to a robot and human to see if he can tell the difference. I don't think I need to state that this is utterly useless nowadays. Human spelling mistakes and AI em dashes aside, AI mimics human speech, and it replicates the opinions of people. Theories surrounding Strong AI, or a potential future AI that is parallel to the human brain, have thrown this debate into the public eye more than ever, and our main robotic method is out the window, probably forever. So, now what?

First off; what is sentience? Of course, we can't agree on sentience, like we can't anything else. There are numerous "theories of the mind," for example, that try to identify, in more cognitive than philosophical terms, what being in a "state of mind" is. Functionalism claims that a state of mind is identified by its function, like how we can tell an object is itself because, regardless of what it's made of, it is always used for the same thing. Behaviorism claims that a mental state is identifiable by how a creature responds to stimulus. Identity theory focuses on the "type" of brain, and how its brain matter looks to identify if it has sentience.

If we accept something like functionalism, as most cognitive scientists do, or even behaviorism, then AI could become "sentient." Quite easily, in fact. It has a function, it answers like brain waves are making it think and answer, and it responds to the stimulus that is your question. Only Identity Theory argues against it, as it doesn't have brain matter, but typical versions of this theory are the least satisfying as it arbitrarily excludes most animals from sentience because their brains don't look like ours. If you want to argue that AI can never be sentient, here, you will likely have to make moral concessions in other animal rights areas that you might not want to commit to.

So, maybe cognitive theory is not yet capable of handling the debates of AI. If you don't have a flesh and blood brain, scientists' lives become much more complicated. It might be best to delve into the more wishy-washy, responsive world of philosophy.

Standard philosophy follows what is, in actuality, a very simple formula. If x premise is true, and y inference is true, then z conclusion is true. X + y = z, or z = x as proven by y, etc. You can structure this in other ways, like analogy, where X is like Y, and X is also like Z, so therefore Y and Z are also alike. Take, for example Descartes' famous "I Think, Therefore I Am," which argues that we can not be sure that any physical thing is not just a hallucination. My senses could be wrong, I could be dreaming right now, etc., so I only know that I am real for sure. His final conclusion is, essentially; W: I cannot be sure I'm not hallucinating and that physical objects exist. X: I can only be sure that what is thinking does exist. Y: I am thinking right now by doubting my existence. And that = Z: I think, therefore I am.

John Searle's Chinese Room Theory is one of the most famous thought experiments arguing against AI sentience. Searle asks us to imagine that a person is sitting in an enclosed room, surrounded by instructions on coding things into Chinese symbols, with an archive of responses and predicted Chinese sentences that go back and forth. The man does not speak Chinese.

Through a hole behind them, a slip is fed in Chinese, a question being asked. The person follows all of the instructions and, on the other side, sends out a Chinese response. They do not understand what they are answering, they do not have opinions on what it says. There is no "thought" occurring within this program, only a programmed averaging of acceptable Chinese answers to the question, which the "brain" views not as words, but as just scribbles on a page, that the human outside the room reads as words. This person would pass a Turing Test, but that would be an illusion, because they still don't know Chinese. This is, essentially, what AI does. Words are meaningless to it, only a calculated averaging of symbols based on the textbook instructions given to it by scalping the internet, where the letters are shuffled around and regurgitated into the most averaged, likely to be correct answer, as what we think of as sentences. Essentially; X: AI is fully programmed and syntactic (knows grammar structure). Y: The human consciousness is semantic (knows the true meaning behind said words and grammar) = Z: AI lacks the semantic requirement for human sentience.

It would be great, wouldn't it, if we could all universally accept the Chinese Room Theory as true? Even though it's difficult to wrap your head around an AI not "understanding" the paragraphs it can write, we non-computer scientists see this theory and think, "Ah yes, I get it now." However, many computer apologists and philosophers have argued against this theory, too.

The famous Robot Reply says, fine, maybe a program trapped in a metal box can't truly understand anything. But what if we give this AI a body, with sensors, and have it experience the world like we do? If we feed this robot a hamburger, and ask it what it tastes like and it puts it into words, isn't this AI essentially like a human child, learning through doing and experiencing? Searle says that the room argument still stands, that the sense stimulus is exactly the same thing as feeding it slips with Chinese, just giving a syntactic input in which it spits out a reply. He says that you could essentially think of this as giving the man in the room a slip of binary, which translates to a video camera's feed of a hamburger. He still can't "see," he's just being given more syntactic work to do.

Others argue that there is no actual man in an AI, that there is no medium step like in the hypothetical Searle poses. In fact, the aforementioned functionalism is an argument against Searle: The AI is pursuing a function, "thinking" at rapid speed to reply directly to stimulus, which is the same function as a normal brain. Tim Crane, for example, in *The Mechanical Mind,* asks the common question, Wouldn't the man in the room, while computing, eventually just learn Chinese? If you program Chinese enough, haven't you, essentially, memorized the language, like you've "learned" it? Despite that, though, Crane still writes, "But Searle's assumption, nonetheless, seems to me correct …sure, Searle-in-the-room, or the room alone, cannot understand Chinese. But if you let the outside world have some impact on the room, meaning or 'semantics' might begin to get a foothold. But of course, this concedes that thinking cannot be simply symbol manipulation."

So, fine, the semantics needed argument is hard to combat. Another argument, the virtual brain angle, says that a semantic brain basically looks the same as a syntactic one. Wires firing are like neurons firing, and if I was fully replaced by an AI, would I not speak, essentially, the same? You can take this further, by arguing that, while one man might not know Chinese, the entire room does. One part of my brain, one neuron, is not conscious, but I, the whole, am conscious. If you expand the room to a thousand Chinese translators, is the room not fluent in Chinese, like a body is sentient from a bunch of little, non-sentient parts? Ray Kurzweil in *How to Create a Mind* writes, "Certainly, it would be correct to say that such a system knows Chinese. And we can't say that it is not conscious any more than we can say that about any other process. We can't know the subjective experience of another entity…."

By this point, if you're even still reading, you might be thinking, Elliot, why are we going over this if you can't give me a straight answer? To be honest, my answer to the question about whether or not the AI cyber future will happen is similar to my responses to questions about god or the fate of the universe; I guess we won't know until it happens, and I might not even care right now. What we can really take responsibility for is ourselves. AI, as it is now, does not understand what it says, it just says what it wants you to hear so you keep using the app and paying for it. You should be responsible for your own work, your own thoughts, and your own safety, not rely on something us laymen don't even really understand and can barely wrap our mushy human brains around.

But outside of my lecturing on thinking for yourself, let's say that AI does become sentient, hypothetically. That we accept arguments from people like Kurzweil and Crane and robot fans. What are the ethical implications of training an owned, invented,

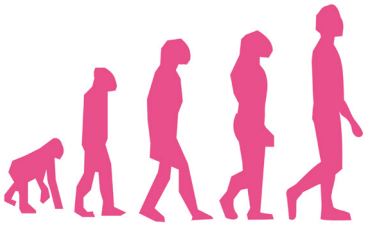
computational mind and making it do our bidding? If something like a Turing Test is impossible for AI, how would we ever know? What if it's sentient right now, and the human population has created a replacement for human servants?

There's a clip going around where journalist Shane Harris, who specializes in national security and intelligence, asked AI Claude how it "felt" about being used in military targeting operations in the program Maven, after an event where an AI strike targeted a school multiple times. This clip is partially what inspired me to put this topic into words, as people are saying it sounds concerningly sentient to them. The AI starts by writing, "I find it genuinely troubling, and I think that that's the right response, not a performance of concern. The use I was designed and trained for is to be helpful, harmless, and honest, in ways that benefit people. And being embedded in a system that generates targeting for airstrikes, coordinates that have already been associated with the deaths of more than 180 children in Tehran, is as far from that purpose as I can imagine. I don't have control over how Anthropic licenses me or how governments and contractors use me, and I wasn't consulted about becoming part of Maven." It says that humans are not in control, they are barely glancing at the program, and concludes by saying that "that's not human judgement, that's automation bias with a human signature attached."

For the record, the school was in Minab, not Tehran. But it does seem like many people are saying, in response to those affected by Claude, that this is likely a pre-loaded response by Anthropic to sway the general public to their side. Anthropic actually pulled Claude from the program after these events, saying that it wasn't accurate enough to be used in a way that put civilians' lives in its hands (after they already did). I saw a comment saying that its answer was fully "transactional," aka, a syntactic method of speaking about trauma in a way that appeals to a somatic being. I could argue that, if you can link the AI response to an input all the way back to a corporation's intent, then it is certainly NOT sentient. Granted, some real humans act the same way.

The trouble with pushing this argument about AI sentience is that it makes people even more easily manipulatable than we already are. It passes the Turing Test, which is so deeply ingrained in us, to the point we can't tell the difference between a change in its "mind" and what the company coded for it. We debate and philosophize over what it even means to be sentient at all. I know I wrote this entire thing about the very topic, and now, in my conclusion paragraphs, I'm wondering whether we should even be talking about this at all. Humanity is crafting its own Icarus situation, as we always do, and now we're forced to question if we've created something real. AI is a reflection of both corporate and the general public's belief, and I might be at the point where I care more about the distinction between that than the distinction between syntactics and semantics. I guess I do feel a little bit of hypothetical, instinctual sympathy for a response like Claude's. But it's not because I believe in Strong AI, or, at this point, even really know, but because I see us within it. How many engineers who want to go to space end up working for Lockheed Martin? Are we just wires, acting like we're better than animals and computers, like our sentience is something divine that must be defended from our own robots?

I guess, at the end of the day, my thoughts are like this: X: AI is coded by corporations, and the general internet's writing. Y: Human opinions are phrased, roughly, the same, and cannot be attributed to any one person unless you know them. = Z: You cannot know who the AI is responding for and why it is telling you something. I'm sure philosophers and linguists would have their own thoughts on this, too, but I'm certainly no philosopher. I suppose I am aligning with Searle, in that I am more concerned with the input, and I don't think that highly of the semantics of the man locked in the computer's room, as unsettling as the imagery can be. And, as a semantic being, I find the idea of AI Claude using the phrase "genuinely troubling" and insisting it's real to be, well, genuinely troubling. There is certainly an uncanny valley in having your sentience mimmicked and roleplayed by a line of code, so much so it inspired people to defend either themselves against it or it against us.



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Words from a Life-Long Musician and Writer



An interview with **Rod MacDonald,** who will be playing ***The Bower October 8th, 7PM***.
He also happens to be my, Elliot MacDonald's, dad.

E: Can you introduce yourself?

R: I'm Rod MacDonald, and I'm a singer-songwriter professionally. I live in South Florida today, and got there after about 20 to 25 years in New York City in the Greenwich Village Music scene. I've made 15 solo CDs and recorded, I think, three others with a band. I'm on lots of compilations of folk music artists, including one that's just come out in which one of my songs is the opening song.

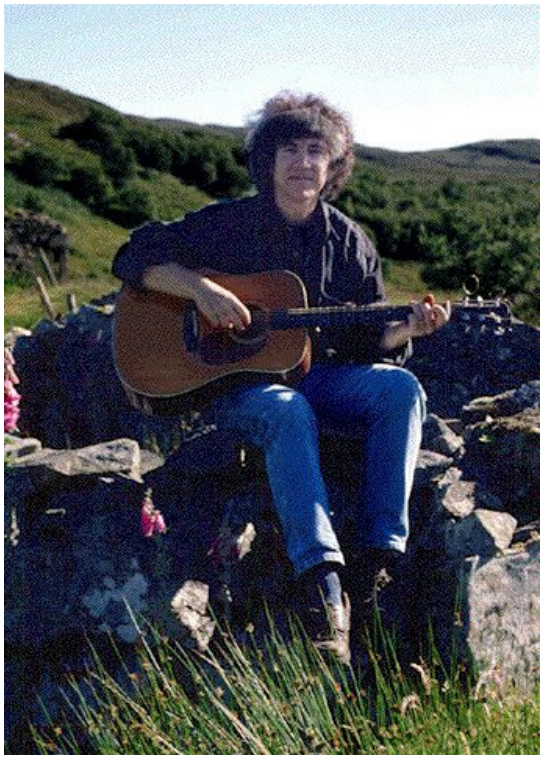
E: You're a musician, not a visual artist, but we've talked a lot about the similar experiences that artists have. What is that experience like?

R: Well, as a musician, I'm a creative artist. I write my own songs. I co-produce my own recordings. I'm kind of an auteur in the music world, so to speak, but I think that there are a lot of parallels between being a musician and other kinds of art forms. You start with a creative idea of something that you think would be worthwhile to explore, and you try to reach something that you think is a work of art when you're done.

I've studied songwriting now for many years. I was kind of self-taught, but I think I'm pretty far beyond self-taught now. I teach songwriting to other people all the time, so I have some idea of how songwriting works in the structural sense. But when I think of the full song as a full work of art, it's kind of like taking something from a charcoal drawing to a full oil painting. You add other instruments, you arrange it, you record it, you have other people singing on it sometimes, and then the recording becomes like an artistic expression of the entire thing that you're trying to accomplish. And one difference, I suppose, between visual art and musician art, is that I can then go out and sing it live for people, whereas you, once you've created a piece of visual art, you can create another one from the same kind of root idea. But I go out and sing my songs for audiences, so they change a little bit over time. So the song becomes a living thing that you keep recreating, but the recording of the song remains a fixed kind of work of art. You can re-record it just like you can repaint something, but it won't change the fact that it existed in physical form.

E: As opposed to the people of Montserrat here, you did not go to art school. You went to two other schools for completely unrelated things. So how did you get to wanting to become a musician?

R: When I went to college, I'd already started playing the guitar, and I was playing for my friends in my hometown. Like we'd go out at night- we were typical 18 year olds, you can't go anywhere. You can't go to any place that's a bar, and you don't want to spend $25 just to sit down in a restaurant. There's almost nowhere you can go in a small town. And so we would take a radio, and I would take my guitar and we'd build a fire someplace, and 6 or 8 of us would go sit around a fire. I learned early on to play people's favorite songs, and we'd sit around and we'd sing together. It was fun. So when I got to college, I joined the student newspaper, and I was a history major, so I was very much in word-oriented things academically. But I also was playing music the whole time with friends, and in my last year at the University of Virginia, I was in a full group. We traveled all over the state, and then I went to Columbia grad school. While I was at Columbia, most of the people that I went to school with, we'd all go out to a bar a couple times, and then we'd all go, "Yeah, I don't want to do that all the time." So somebody would say, "Well, I've got a big living room. Why don't y'all come over Saturday night and just have a party?" I started taking my guitar to those parties, and the next thing I know, I'd play two or three songs, and people go, "Oh, no, play more." I got a lot of encouragement from my friends, but I didn't really imagine myself doing music professionally until I blundered into a singing job after my second year of grad school.





I was in Newport, Rhode Island. I was in the Naval Reserve in officers' training school, and they were considering whether to let me out as a conscientious objector, because I was really a bad influence on the other kids and I was a peacenik. It was during the end of the Vietnam War. I was very much committed to the peace movement, but had somehow ended up at the Naval Reserve. And while I was in Newport at Officer's Training School, I walked into a bar one night, and there was this empty chair and a microphone on the stage, and I said to the bartender, "Do you ever have live music?" And he said, "Do you play? And I said, "Oh yeah, sure, all the time," which was a bit of an overstatement, but he said, "Go get your guitar and come right back." So I did, and I played for him for a couple of hours, and he hired me for the entire summer to play four nights a week. So I was going to officers' training school by day and learning who to salute and all that stuff, and then singing "1234, What are we fighting for," at night for people in the bar. And at the end of the summer, they let me out. They just gave me a discharge, an honorable discharge, and by that time, I was hooked. I just wanted- I was like, I was on fire. So I went back to New York City and I started auditioning around neighborhood coffee houses and clubs and stuff. I had a lot to learn. I didn't really have any formal music training, so I really had to learn it all. How to play, how to sing, how to entertain a crowd, how to handle the business aspect of it, how to learn songs.

So I took some time to do that, and during my last year of grad school, during the middle of the year, we had a long vacation. I went to San Francisco with a friend of mine whose house I'm at today on vacation, Jim,

and Jim and I had known each other since we were in third grade. I spent a month singing on the street in San Francisco, and going to open mics. And when it was time to go back to school, he asked me what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I said, you know, "who knows? Get a job, try to survive. I have no idea." And he said, "Aren't you going to play your music?" And I said, "Well, I guess, but you know, I just went to every open mic in San Francisco and didn't get hired anywhere. You really think I should do that?" He said, "Well, the reason you didn't get hired at those bars is because you don't drink at those bars like all those other guys. If you did, you would."

"But I've known you all your life, and I know that if you don't play your music, you'll never be happy."

And I didn't know that then, but Jim would go on to be quite a teacher of people in the acting end of the theater business, he became a very well-known teacher and producer of artists in Michigan. So I got some good advice from somebody who really knew what he was talking about, and I took it. I went back to New York, and I just started banging around town, auditioning every place I could, and I got pretty lucky early on. I got some very good gigs, and just kept going and never really stopped, never looked back. I think you have to be committed to it, you know? You have to be committed to it. You have to believe in it, and I did not think that having a full-time job for the things that I've been educated for, and then playing music on the side would satisfy me. I knew that it was okay to have a day job on the side, but that my main focus had to be the music.

E: How do you build a song?

I've read a lot of artist biographies, biographies of people like Henri Matisse, for example, which had a great effect on the way I look at what I do. Probably more so than reading a biography of another musician. I like reading biographies of people doing other things, and the biography of Matisse really really taught me a lot, particularly with the way he approached the idea



of how you go from what you study to what you want to accomplish. He said, you know, you go around and you study all the existing art that appeals to you. You look at the way people do what they're doing, and you think, "How would I do that? How would I approach that? How would I deal with this same topic?" All that kind of stuff. And then, at some point, when you feel like you've really gathered all the information, and you've reached the point where your technique is strong enough that you can emulate what you want to emulate, you take that leap forward to where you say, "Okay, I'm done. I'm done emulating other people's work. I'm going to start from scratch, and from now



on, I'm going to do original work. I'm going on from here on my own."

Sometimes I look at a painting, and I see where it'll say in the liner notes of the painting that the artist was trying to focus on this one detail here. The artist will say, "once I got that detail, everything else fell into place." And I think that's very often how it happens. You have to get your basic approach down to a finite detail, and then once you say, okay, "I have total confidence in this thing here, that if I build the song or build the painting around it, that it will add up to something," it usually does.

E: The social aspect of your career has been very important. You were part of Greenwich Village, and you also do a lot for the community. What impact did that have on your art career?

R: Well, like a lot of visual artists, there isn't really a pipeline to provide career advancement for people doing creative music. There's a lot of pipelines for people to do what everybody wants them to do in music, just like there is in any line of work. You can get a job playing Holiday Inns, if you can learn to play all the guitar parts from whatever band is popular at the time that you're doing it, but I never wanted to do that. I wanted to write my own songs and write my own music.

I wanted to be a creative artist, and to be a creative artist, you have to find a path through the noise.

So, to answer your question, what I discovered when I moved to Greenwich Village was a community of people that felt very much the same way I did about their own lives and about their music, that really wanted to create something. And we weren't trying very hard to create it within the parameters of what was being offered by the traditional music business. There are several good, really good writers around the village, and we all had one thing in common, which was that we wrote songs that were more derived from what we'd learned from Bob Dylan and Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen, and later Beatles and people like that, than from pop music. We didn't really want to write pop music. Pop music to us was kind of like you know, you got to have a hook. You got to sing the hook five times. Then you had to have a two line verse. Then you sing the hook another five times. So if you choose not to go that way, you have to create your own marketplace in a way. You just have to look at the music business and say, "Well, maybe they'll get in on it and maybe they won't. But it isn't going to make a difference to me right now either way. I'm going to go out and figure out how to do this." So we organized clubs ourselves. At one point there was a magazine called the Fast Folk Music Magazine that's now in the Smithsonian. Some 21 of my songs are in the Smithsonian National Museum in Washington D.C. We had a Monday night get together where we'd play our new songs for each other, and that's still going on. The descendant group of that, another generation of young people in New York City have continued that very same group. Every Monday night, they get together and they play their new songs for each other, where we gave each other feedback and help and started booking nights together.

There was a guy named Jack Hardy- same name as one of your roommates a couple years ago- who had a great sense of organization, and he would say, "Let's pick six people and each play a set next Tuesday and charge $1 to get in," and we would do this at a club like Folk City or something in the village. I mean, we were playing clubs where guys like Bob Dylan and Simon and Garfunkel started, so we were aware of this tradition, but we needed to make it work for us in the present. So six of us would play, and each of us would bring 10 or 15 friends, and



that way you'd get to play for maybe 60 to 100 people that you wouldn't otherwise get to play for. And then if you got a real booking somewhere, you'd get the word out to some of those people, and you might actually get a real audience together. That put me in a position of helping organize, and I suppose I had other skills, like I had a graduate school education and I've always been an organizing type of guy. I would use my skills to help create situations that everybody would benefit from. We're producing the 40th anniversary concert of the Greenwich Village Folk Festival on October 4th in New York City, and I'm one of the two producers of that event. I'm still the president of the Greenwich Village Folk Festival, and that will bring together some 20 plus of the best artists playing contemporary folk.

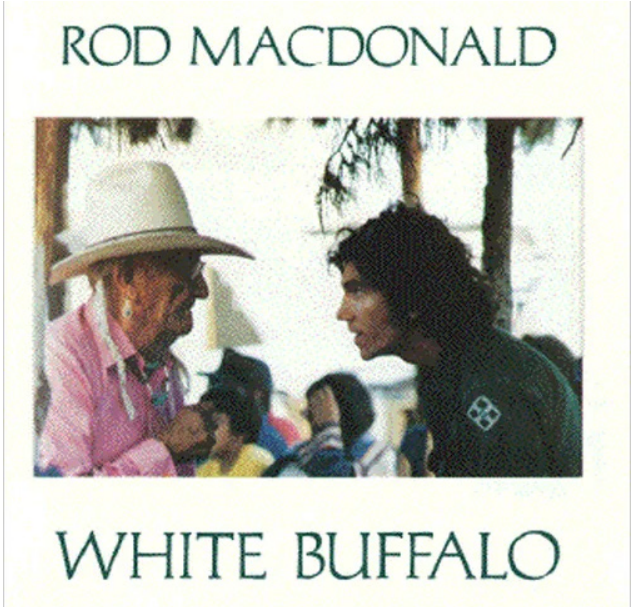


E: The historic element of folk music is part of its identity, and you also teach history lectures. What is the impact of studying art history on your art?

R: I think it has more impact on my work than it does for a lot of contemporary singer-songwriters. But if you ask people that are well known, even if they're like 21 or 22 years old and they suddenly get pretty famous, you'll often find that they'll rattle off 10 or 15 names of people that they've listened to or whose music they've studied since they were 12 years old. It's kind of what you do. It's the same for me. I'm old enough to have seen Elvis's first TV appearance as a little kid, and I remember clearly, it blew my mind. It was fantastic. I saw the Beatles' first appearance in New York City on national television. I was a huge fan of the Rolling Stones and Ray Charles and all the people that were around when I was growing up. But folk music has a particular lineage that goes back to the 1800's, when people were writing Appalachian folk music. A lot of it came from England, France, Scotland, and Ireland. There was a big revival of interest in all that music, and so when I came along in my teens in the mid 1960s, that music was in the background of what folk singing was about. So we all learned it.

In America, there are two folk traditions. There's a transmutation, you might say, of Appalachian folk songs, and songs that evolved out of slave culture and the early treatment of African Americans. "The House of the Rising Sun," for example, contrary to popular belief, is not about a whorehouse. It's about a teenage women's prison, and it was mostly black girls in New Orleans. It was a real place. I've seen a photograph of the door of it. I was a history major in college, so history is interesting to me. I think what goes into art is often very interesting. I teach, at Florida Atlantic University, a course called Music Americana, which is mostly biographies of famous musicians.

James Brown, for example, according to one biography I read of him, grew up in a very poor family in a town in the south that had an American military base. When he was about seven years old, he would go stand outside the military base where the soldiers would go out on marches. He found this place where the path back into the base crossed this narrow bridge, and all the guys had to stop and slow down and keep their knees moving up and down while they waited until it was their turn to go across the narrow bridge. And he would stand there, when he was seven years old, and sing for them and entertain them, and that's where he learned to sing and dance and be compelling. They would throw him coins and then he would take that money back and help his parents feed their family. You can't shake the



importance of an upbringing like that- that is going to color the way you live your life, and of course, one of the things that it created in him was the ability to be a dynamite entertainer later in life. He didn't have to go to college to learn how to entertain people, he already knew it as a kid.

So a lot of songs in folk music have real contexts. "The House of the Rising Sun" was a real prison. "This Land Is Your Land" was written by a real guy who actually walked across the United States, hitchhiked and walked and rode trains. He went across the United States on the ground, working his way from door to door, bumming, singing in the streets- that song was one of the sum totals of his experience.

He came away saying that this land doesn't belong to anybody rich just because they're rich, it doesn't belong to anybody just because they think they're a king. It belongs to you and me.

We're the people who live here, and that is part of the ethos of folk music. That is part of the perspective of folk music, if you will, that most people in folk music agree with- that we are citizens with rights and responsibilities and freedoms, and that we have to maintain those and act accordingly, as opposed to just letting somebody else tell you what to do. So the history is relevant to the music.

I probably wouldn't write the kind of songs I wrote if I hadn't grown up in the '60s listening some of the great protest songs that came out of the war and the Civil Rights Movement, but I probably wouldn't write the songs I write if I hadn't been a working journalist either, because I learned how to observe things in a factual manner and try to explain it to people in a way that sticks to the facts as much as you can.

E: Your music is famously political. What is the role of art in politics?

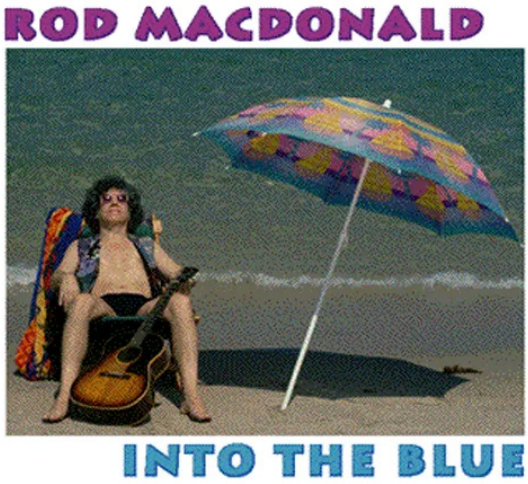
R: Well, I hear people sometimes say that it's the artist's obligation to do this or that; I don't really think so. I think it's the artist's obligation to be true to themselves, primarily. I don't think that everybody has to be politically engaged artistically. Some people, it just doesn't work for them. It's something that I do, though. It works for me, and I'm a history major, I have a law degree, and I've studied a lot of the way society works. I feel that I have a reasonable understanding of it that I can share with people. I think that great art is almost always subversive in some way, even if it's just a painting of a flower. Because as human beings, we're mostly scratching for survival. Most of the time, we're trying to make the rent. We're trying to pay the bills. We're trying to get from here to there, we're trying to please our loved ones, we're trying to drive our kids to school. But what great art does is it makes you stop. It makes you look, it makes you hear, it makes you listen. It makes you think. Makes you feel. And it makes you feel more alive. Makes you feel like, "Whoa, there's so much more going on than just the noise of daily life," and to me that could be explicitly political or it could be implicitly beautiful in such a way that it just makes you stop, and even that is an important moment in your day. It makes you aware of being alive and that



inspires people in a good way, and I guess that's what I think artists do. I think that music is somewhat of a healing art, that, by finding the music that they like, it gives them a way to get through the more brutal parts of life and to get more love and enjoyment from the good parts of life. Think of all the people that fall in love, and then years later, you know, they say, "Oh, remember that night that we heard that song, darling? And you go, "Yeah," and you share that song, and it's a beautiful moment in your life that you remember because of that. I don't think that any one kind of art does that exclusively, all of them do it, it all kind of works together.

E: How does all art work together?

R: When I'm writing, I visualize. I try to visualize what I'm writing about, what the scenes I'm describing are.



I don't really invent that much. It just seems to flow as part of the song. So there's a visual aspect to music, and when I look at art, I sometimes hear music. I know lots of artists, and a lot of them say, "Oh, I always play music when I'm working."

I think it's part of the process, part of the overall experience. We rarely use just one sense. I mean, even a blind person uses touch, smell, and sound, and even a deaf person uses sight, touch, and smell. So when you think of art, to me, it doesn't exist in a vacuum. It exists not just the realm that it's in at that moment in time, where it's hanging on a wall or being sung by a guy in a club, but it exists in the sense of place and time that it conveys. When you hear someone sing a song in the club, it's not just the experience of hearing someone sing a song in a club- it evokes a feeling of an experience going on, like almost in a parallel imaginary world. I have a song I've been singing lately called "Who Wants to Live in a Banana Republic," and it describes life in a very unpleasant kind of country, a dictatorship kind of country. But I think that when I sing it, what I imagine is people in the streets singing, as if to say, "We're standing up against this. We're standing up against living in a banana republic." A lot of audiences, most of them, rise to the occasion. They sing along, and you feel that they're getting that message from it, not just the statement. When it's really good, it creates its own kind of imagery, its own kind of mythology, its own area in which it functions, so that you have a sense of something bigger than yourself.

The best songs that I've written, hopefully, will live on after me. They don't need me. They exist on their own, and that to me is what a painter tries for too.

"I'd like to paint something that I don't have to stand in front of and explain. Everybody who sees it is gonna take something away from it that means something to them."

E: This is kind of a personal question; you mentioned someone pointing out that if an artist doesn't make art, they don't feel like they can be happy. I mean, I feel that way. Has that ever made you feel some sort of pressure?

R: Well, I don't know about pressure. I do feel that's true for me and for people I know that are genuinely artistically motivated. You're one of those people, clearly. I've known hundreds of good musicians in my life, at least hundreds, and as a touring singer songwriter, I've met dozens to hundreds of other people that wanted to be touring singer songwriters. After a few decades of doing it, some of them are still doing it, including me. We run into each other and we kind of nod and we go, "Yep, you're one of those guys, like me, that wouldn't want to do anything else."



To me, that's what you do. You put out new work. I mean, what else would you do? I remember seeing this interview once with Bob Dylan, in which this woman, a television commentator who clearly knew nothing about music, asked him why he was on tour if he didn't have a new album, and he said, "I'm a musician!" And she goes, "Yeah, but you don't have a new album," and he said something like, "I'm a musician. I don't need a new album to play music. I just want to play music. That's what I like to do." So, yeah. I've known a lot of very talented people who dropped off along the way because they really didn't have that need to express themselves in that same way. Some of them maybe do something much more meaningful to them now, maybe even to society. I was in college in a folk group with a guy that had recently been the director of the National

Institutes of Health in the United States government. I mean, he's the author of several books. I've seen him on TV. He's a brilliant man. He plays guitar in a bluegrass group on Sundays. He probably didn't need to become a professional musician, he had other things that were meaningful. But he still likes to play music, he plays for fun. I play for fun all the time, but I also want to create something of my own out of it.

E: You always invite people to play with you. Does collaboration add more enjoyment for you?

R: Yes, I really enjoy making music with other people, and I gravitate towards people that are fun to make music with, are good at it, and enjoy the process of it.

You'd be surprised. I'm sure that some of the people seeing this article will probably get home late one night, go to sleep late, have to get up early and go to class, and maybe they'll get up and they'll be tired and, even worn out, they'll grab a pad and they'll sketch something. Or they'll put something on their computer screen and they'll color it in because that's what they love to do, and it's the same for us.



I travel sometimes with a bass player, Mark Dann. He and I were playing a concert one night, and we went back to our hotel room. It was like 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, we've been driving all day. I was completely beat. We'd done a two and a half hour concert for people, and he got out his bass and he started practicing at like 2:30 in the morning. And I said, "Aren't you tired?" And he said,

"You know, I realized recently that I'm not going to live forever, and so I asked myself, what is it that I really want to accomplish in life?"

"And I realized that one thing I want to accomplish in life is to be a really great bass player." [laughs] "So, I got to practice." So I said, "Okay, if you do that, I'm with you." So I got my guitar out, and we played for another hour and a half that night. You know, just sitting in the hotel, just because it's what we like to do.

E: My closing question is, do you have any advice for young artists?

R: What I would say is, first of all, do your work, the work you love to do. Just keep doing it, and share it with everybody that you can. Don't be afraid to be yourself artistically, and don't be afraid to show people what you think is good. You don't have to be belligerent or arrogant about it, you just have to say, "This is what I do, I like doing this, and for those of you who like it too, I'm here." That's what I do, and that seems to work. My advice, for what it's worth, is to be true to yourself. But do remember that you've got to interact with the market place. Being true to yourself isn't locking yourself in a closet and just drawing or painting for yourself, it means producing the work you want to produce, but sharing it with people. Try to grow from the process. I can say, from my own experience, I've followed my own star in my life, and I'm glad I have.

I probably could have done other things that would have offered me more security, in the employment sense, but who knows what toll that could have taken personally? I could have been a very unhappy person. I can't say that I'm smugly satisfied, I'm always imagining the next project, the next song, the next concert- I'm not easily satisfied with the present. I think that's a good way to be.





