The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20240825130355/https://www…

small
THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Title
title
WHAT GILLIAN WELCH AND DAVID RAWLINGS TOOK FROM THE TORNADO

Content
The legendary folk artists discuss rescuing their tapes from a catastrophic storm, singing as if they have one mouth, and making music that's like a pebble tossed in a river.

small
By Amanda Petrusich

August 25, 2024

Photograph by David McClister

Image

small
Save this story

Since 1996, when Gillian Welch and her partner, the guitarist David Rawlings, released “Revival,” their début album, they’ve been making tense and eerie acoustic music about desire and devastation, the sacred and the profane, by and by, Lord, by and by. The duo’s music—some of the first to be dubbed “Americana”—often feels both ancient and instinctive, as though these songs have always existed, oozing out of a phonograph horn on some distant astral plane. These days, it seems preposterous that Welch’s provenance—she was adopted and brought up in Los Angeles—was once controversial within the roots-music scene. Though it was honed in the American South, the vernacular music that she and Rawlings pull from is inclusive and yielding by design; to be proprietary about this sort of folk music is to misunderstand its ethos entirely. These songs obliterate notions of time and place, focussing, instead, on the threads of joy and sorrow that make us human.

This month, Welch and Rawlings will release “Woodland,” their seventh collaboration. The record was shaped, in part, by the fallout of a catastrophic tornado that whipped through Nashville in the early-morning hours of March 3, 2020. I recently spoke with Welch and Rawlings from their home on the east side of the city. During our conversation, which has been edited and condensed, I found them thoughtful, open, and prone to finishing each other’s sentences. “Before we started talking to you today, I was actually thinking about the frustrations of trying to give meaningful interviews,” Welch told me. “Art is how I relate to the world; I have to do this to communicate, because I’m not that great at expressing myself outside of it. I try; I’m a decently verbal person. What’s really going on in here, it’s hard for me to tell you—but it goes into the songs.”

Content

Your new record is named after Woodland Studios, in East Nashville, which you bought in 2002. Can you tell me a little about your history there?

GILLIAN WELCH: We worked there on our first record, with T Bone Burnett.

DAVID RAWLINGS: We intended to make the second record there, then T Bone wanted to make it out in California, at Sound City. But we were in and out of the building enough for us to figure out that it was our favorite studio in town. When a tornado came through in the late nineties and damaged the roof, there was a little bit of a dispute between the landlord and the person who ran the studio. That ended with the building coming up for sale. Then it sat on the market for a couple years.

G.W.: Neil Young made "Comes a Time" there. The beginnings of Americana, before it was Americana—way before. The first coming together of country and bluegrass and folk.

My admittedly speculative sense is that Woodland is maybe a bit of a sacred space—I realize tornadoes and things of that nature are not remotely romantic or sacramental, but there's something about its persistent physical survival that's almost spooky.

D.R.: Since 1900, there have been three tornadoes that we know of that have gone through Nashville. And, if you look at the map that shows their paths, they're virtually on the same vector. I mean, they barely cross. They're almost parallel lines. But if you look at where all three of those tornadoes did cross—

G.W.: It's Five Points. It's our studio. It's literally in the intersection. Every time, they come right over our studio.

What do you remember about the night of the 2020 tornado? It was just the two of you and your friend Glen Chausse, who was staying at the studio.

G.W.: I remember an almost miraculous strength, and a feeling of providence. I don't know how we did what we managed to do. It was very chaotic and very scary. I grew up in California and was accustomed to huge wildfires, to just turning around seeing an entire hillside aflame. But this was dark and confusing—twelve thousand feet of pitch blackness. We didn't know how much of the building had been compromised, because we couldn't see. It was the middle of the night, and we knew that water was starting to come through, and so we kept moving stuff to a place we thought was safe. And when I say stuff, I mean *so* much stuff. All of our master tapes, all of our guitars. Everything. Our entire musical life.

D.R.: I remember listening. A lot of my memory from that night is auditory: listening to the water as the upper parts of the roof were starting to come down. It was just getting worse and worse, more and more intense. We were running into different rooms and trying to assess. I remember going into one room, just outside the tape vault, opening the door, and the ceiling came down. Like, O.K.—well, that one's not good.

G.W.: We thought a corner of the "A" room—where, in the end, we made this record—was safe.

D.R.: It was an isolation booth that had its own ceiling. But, three hours later, the water's getting all the way through. That was where we had put all the instruments. We had to move them again.

G.W.: It was a terrible feeling because it just got progressively worse.

D.R.: At the same time, we were unbelievably fortunate, because if we hadn't been in town, if we'd been on the road, we would have lost pretty much all of it. We were able to be there; so many people never get that kind of a chance. There was so much calculus in trying to figure out what the next move was. I have one L.E.D. light that, if it hadn't been charged, I don't know what we would have done.

G.W.: We had that L.E.D. light and three iPhones.

D.R.: We were trying to call everyone we know, and of course, the phones didn't work. You don't realize how far out on the technological ledge you live, every single day of your life, until the power goes out.

G.W.: Communications go down, and then you are three people, alone, trying to save your life's work.

D.R.: There are fifteen people who would have come over, but you can't reach them, and they don't know what's happening.

Was there a moment in that process—running in and out, grabbing tape, grabbing guitars, dodging rubble, getting soaked—where you thought, We're gonna get ourselves killed?

G.W.: I only had the thought of personal danger after the fact, when people were saying, "Thank goodness you guys are O.K. and didn't get clobbered." Honestly, in the moment, it never crossed my mind. It was just, Keep moving the guitars, keep moving the tapes. I did start to flip out at one point when the entire "A" room was standing water, and big chunks of ceiling were starting to come down, and we still had to get eight racks of guitars. We'd gotten them onto dollies, and we had to run this gauntlet through the six inches of water in the hallway, under sheets of cascading water, just going as fast as we could. I was really going into reptile-panic mode.

D.R.: I just kept thinking, Wow, it's so interesting that this building has so many different ceilings!

It feels as though all of this could be generative in a dark way—a lesson in how to remain. That idea feels central—spiritually, lyrically—to the new record.

D.R.: The truth of it is, we were trying to tie that all in. We were already planning a nod to the tornado and the chaos. The working title of the project was "Empty Trainload of Sky." But as we got closer to finishing the sequence, it crossed my mind that, since the tornado, I've been in that building fourteen to sixteen hours a day, every day, for five years. And so if anything had shaped the emotional content

small

G.W.: It was Woodland. So much energy and effort and tears and sweat—and certainly a little blood—went into bringing it back again. We were so happy to not have it destroyed.

D.R.: Let's discuss even the wisdom of bringing it back. . . .

G.W.: It's gonna happen again!

D.R.: It's not like anything has changed with the environment. Severe weather events are more common. We're doing this thing, and I'm thinking, What do we get? Maybe twelve months? Do we get two years?

But there's something so beautiful about that, too. It's like falling in love—you know it could end in absolute disaster, in boundless heartache, but what choice do you have? You do it anyway.

G.W.: [*Laughs.*] It's gonna end in darkness and a collapsing ceiling.

The theme of disaster has been on my mind lately: all these horrifying, existentially unsettling things that once seemed off the table, things that were so unlikely or impossible, things that only conspiracy theorists worried about, man, they all feel so *possible* now. I suppose Woodland, as a place, can be seen as a kind of nexus of that?

G.W.: You're right on. So much of what went into this record was things happening that you couldn't imagine happening, losing things that you could not imagine losing. Unimaginable destruction.

D.R.: We had enough songs that we were kind of aiming toward a double record. Then I changed my mind and thought, Maybe we'll do something akin to what Bright Eyes did in 2005—put out two records that are slightly different in theme at the same time. But as I was sequencing what ended up being "Woodland," I saw these themes of—"Bells and the Birds," is it a song, or is it a warning? It's about trying to interpret what is happening around you, and decide is it good, or is it bad?

G.W.: Is it happy, or sad? What is it? This theme of "What is it?" is in "Empty Trainload of Sky." What *is* it? It came from this vision of a train that didn't seem to have any substance. It was passing across the sky and there was a real moment of "What are we seeing? What is this?"

D.R.: Is it carrying everything—

G.W.: Or is it nothing?

Did your experience of the tornado change how you think about the ephemerality or materiality of your work? Because it is very possible, right now, to make music using software, and to store and release it digitally—so the experience, from start to finish, is never a tactile one, unless you count fingers on a laptop keyboard or a phone.

G.W.: I'm so grateful that it was tape. If a hard drive had gotten wet, it would have been toast.

D.R.: I think we've spent a lot of time confronting that idea, thinking about how ephemeral everything is. I mean, that's a theme that runs through the music. So it wasn't an awakening, like, "Oh, I've never considered this." It was almost a reinforcement of what we've chosen to spend our lives thinking about.

G.W.: There was a renewed courage at that point. The last vestiges of the room that weren't really tailored to what we do were wiped away. We were almost kids when

we bought it, and we didn't change a lot of stuff. I had too much respect for the room. But now it is really our room, and tailored to the sounds we make.

D.R.: We can do strings in the "A" room now, because it's become this big open space. And we were able to set up a new system where I can record without anyone else there, which means it can be even more intimate. Once we were back up and running, it had a beautiful lift to it.

With any kind of major loss, it seems as if there's always this little kernel of radical possibility on the other side. When everything is destroyed, you get to remake your life.

G.W.: Though certain things you really don't want to rebuild. The night of the tornado, two of our main guitars were here at the house. When the sirens started going off, first we suited up—we put on boots. Don't want to be barefoot. And then we grabbed the guitars. We don't have a basement here, so I was in the hall bathroom with the two guitars, hugging the toilet while the tornado went overhead.

Years ago, I wrote a book about obsessive collectors of very rare, prewar 78-r.p.m. records. I remember finding it so beautiful and poignant, so miraculous, that any of those disks had survived at all. Shellac is brittle; it shatters and chips easily. Holding some of those rare records in my hands, these utterly extraordinary recordings, I don't know, it reminded me that sometimes, stuff matters.

G.W.: Of course it matters! You're talking about art. You're talking about saving art, in the moment, when, in fact, your life is in danger. But you're gonna brave that danger.

Because there's an understanding that the art will outlive you? Not to minimize the human experience, but at least theoretically, art has an endless reach—

D.R.: It can last generations. I remember Robyn Hitchcock saying something to us a long time ago about how after a certain number of these records that we made, you're part of the cultural bloodstream.

Content

G.W.: It's in there.

D.R.: I'd never thought of it that way. But I think anyone who makes art and shares it with other people—no matter how few people—has enacted a change. Even somebody who does a really good job building a front door to a house. When you walk through that door, it makes you feel different about the human experience. All of these things affect us. With art, you move to, "Well, is that thing useful, beyond the fact that when I see it on the wall, it makes my eyes happy?" And then you confront these large questions that we could talk about forever.

G.W.: It's surprising to me, thinking about this very thing. More than ever I feel part of a musical continuum. I really *feel* the people who inspired and came before us. I was thinking about our song "Hashtag," which is at least partly about Guy Clark dying.

D.R.: I think about John Hartford, and what it was like when we spent time with him when we first got to town. Thinking, I just want to live up to these people, and their contributions, and how they were as human beings when they were around the age I am now.

G.W.: There was a particular and beautiful kind of reciprocity to it, too. Let's take Guy, for instance, or Hartford. I felt this joy from them. We were almost like their musical children. They could see their music moving forward in us, and they were so happy. They were so relieved. They were so grateful!

David, I remember reading an interview with you in *Rolling Stone*, where you were talking about how folk music picks up a little bit of the DNA of everybody who has ever performed it. And, because of that, playing those tunes, it feels

like there's a hundred people in the room—it makes a person feel less lonely. It's a pliable form, and you can always see the fingerprints.

G.W.: A pebble in the river that's just been rolled and tossed and turned.

Content

D.R.: But also, because it's folk music, you're allowed to take a piece of slate and knock half of it out and go, "Y'know, that rock's pretty nice as a triangle, too!" If people like your triangle—

G.W.: They add! We've twisted every folk song that we sing.

I wanted to come back to "Hashtag" for a moment. When I first saw the tracklist for "Woodland," I was really surprised to see a song with that title. Somehow, the world of Gillian Welch and David Rawlings felt incompatible, to me, with the very idea of a hashtag. I love this line, though it's quite dark: "You laughed and said the news would be bad / If I ever saw your name with a hashtag / Singers like you and I are only news when we die." That idea of reducing an entire life or an entire legacy to a hashtag. Brutal!

G.W.: I remember feeling really jarred because, like us, Guy was just *not* one of those people who engaged with modern technology.

D.R.: He was so committed to word and craft.

G.W.: And so to get the news that way, and to know instantly, it was just, it was just, Oh . . . I gasped, and felt sick. And I knew. I remember how awful and darkly humorous that moment was. How strange.

D.R.: When I think about our relationship with art—getting a little older, having done this a little longer—I think about these gigs we did with him when we went to Texas for the first time. We were opening for him at a place called the Mucky Duck, a little club in Houston. We had played our set and we were watching Guy's set, and he got to the end of his show, left the stage, and got called back for

an encore. Came back, did an encore. He had put on such a beautiful show, and he had such a beautiful self-possessed way about him. There was such gravity when Guy stood onstage. He played this song, and then he walked off again, and the crowd just wasn't havin' it. They were *not* going to leave. And I can't remember what he played—"Let Him Roll"? I don't remember what the last song was, but he just waved them off. He said, "Go home!"

G.W.: He just leaned out of the dressing room. He wouldn't even go back out. He kind of hung on the door trim, and leaned out: "Go home!"

D.R.: He knew his art better than they knew his art.

G.W.: He'd done it.

D.R.: Yes. And he truly had.

G.W.: The show was done!

D.R.: I learned something about understanding what you do, and also the value of not doing it. You're gonna do the best job you can, and when you have done it, stand firm. I thought, Wow, I don't know if I'll ever get to that place. We were young. It was long before our first record. It was the first we'd really seen of how musicians are on the road. I remember sitting in a Motel 6 in Guy's room. We had left the venue and we had taken this giant tinfoil pan of barbecue with us back to his room, and I just remember Guy and I standing there over the bed eating ribs and just laughing. I don't know what we were making, maybe a hundred dollars a night? Who knows. But he was willing to give of himself to us, to teach us. To tell us where the best pimento-cheese sandwich was.

G.W.: He'd tell us which exit between each town. He'd say, "Now, when you're going between Houston and Dallas, you're gonna wanna stop here. If you're going between Dallas and Austin, you're gonna wanna stop here." This is way before cell phones and G.P.S. You *needed* this information! You've got a Rand McNally at

that point. If we were in Texas, in kind of unknown territory, we would call Guy. I'd say, "Guy, we're down around San Antonio and we need dinner." And he'd say, "O.K." He'd think for a minute. "All right, there's a barbecue place . . ."

For each of you, do you have a clear sense of which version—performed or recorded—feels like the truest version of a song?

Content

G.W.: I'm really happy with some songs that we caught very early. Something like "Elvis Presley Blues." We finished the song and recorded it the same night. Maybe we became more accomplished at performing it, but, in the recording, I hear that very short distance between the inspiration and the writing of it. I hear us still in our writers' brains. "I Dream a Highway"—same thing. The version on tape is the first time I sang it through. I can hear that in it. I'd never sung it stem to stern.

D.R.: When Gill is singing something for the very first time, there's more variation and melisma on even the simplest melodies. I want every bit of that. Because by the time she's sung it five times, they're gonna become more formalized. But the flip side of what you're saying is, sometimes being in front of people and feeling energy come back as you're singing something, you can take things to a place where they get emotionally re-amplified a little bit. Maybe it becomes a little bigger in a way that can be fun.

G.W.: Some songs just are more suited to the quiet, interior space of the studio. Some are more suited to have their more perfect performance happen in public. "Red Clay Halo," or something like that. We probably bested the studio recording any number of times.

D.R.: This makes me think of one time we played this song that ended up being called "The Way It Will Be," but this was before it had a title. We were in a trailer at Bonnaroo for a radio thing. There were a couple of mikes and maybe twelve or fifteen people sitting in that trailer. We started it, and the guitars hit the note, and it just created a space in that room, and we sang our unison note, and it was just as

spooky as can be. I think that might have been the finest performance of that song.

Performing for just a dozen people sounds terrifying.

Content

D.R.: Especially when two of them are on their phones!

G.W.: Back when I was trying to get a publishing deal, I was still walking into those offices with my guitar. I was not even playing tape. I'm walking in, uncasing my guitar, and sitting in a chair across the desk from a person. One person. That's how I got a publishing deal; that's how I got the record deal. That world is gone.

D.R.: On our first record, T Bone was still working on tape. It was analog recording, it was still connected to the great recordings of the late sixties and the seventies. In so many ways, we've had the opportunity to keep the parts of the old world that worked for us, but then also to move forward. I feel happy to have been in that position—to have seen it and lived it enough to know which parts can't be replaced.

I like the idea of music being a thing I make space for in my home—a thing I hold in my hands. How do you prefer to listen to records? This reminds me that I have to point out that "Time (The Revelator)" does not yet exist on vinyl. I'm wearing out my CD!

D.R.: I do listen to vinyl records a decent amount, at the house or at the studio. But I love listening to music in the car. CDs. I'll sometimes stream stuff on my phone. I'm looking forward to being on the road because, when you have a four-hour drive—

G.W.: Then we listen to way more music.

D.R.: You can't be doing anything else. And what else do I want to do? I want to hear new songs, and I want to hear music that I've loved for years, and see how it

Content

hits me in a new moment.

Headline

G.W.: Singing along with the Stanley Brothers, old Chet Baker. Honestly, that's how we honed our harmony singing.

Content

D.R.: "Time (The Revelator)" on vinyl is something I want to do. I started down that path right before the tornado. It's a very difficult record to cut, because it's almost sixty minutes long. And then you have to confront the question of, do you try and get it on one disk? There's a finite amount of physical space on a record, and the more music you put, the quieter it has to be. On that record, the vocal is very hot relative to the music; the vocal peaks are very hard. If you get them to where they're not crashing the vinyl, the music is quiet. I think that [Radiohead's] "OK Computer" is one of the greatest CDs ever made. They try to do these high-quality vinyl versions of it, and it sounds like mush, because it's too hard. It has too much dynamic range to really be captured right on vinyl. Maybe if you cut it at 45 r.p.m. Music does have a connection to the format it was made on. But yes, it's coming, and nothing will make me happier.

This is going to sound sort of bonkers, because you each possess distinct voices and ranges and tones, but there are moments on the new one where I almost don't know who's singing. To what extent do you think these years of collaborating have sort of bent your voices toward each other?

G.W.: Well, Dave has always been the better rock-and-roll singer. Always. I tend to think about microscopic things. I get very myopic, and if something's not working—I remember one time, he was, like, "Can you just put it on the beat? It'd have more impact if you just put it on the beat." I've never forgotten that. The rock-and-roll singer.

D.R.: I mean, we've certainly heard each other sing for a long time. I've always thought Gill is a much stronger singer. I love the role of harmony singing so much. A lot of little tricks that I do in harmony singing are actually no good for lead singing. I was very conscious of not annunciating consonants or things at the

end of words, or shaping my vowels so that they fit with what Gill was doing. But gradually, over time, I could hear what was good about what I was doing and what was bad. On "Howdy Howdy," it was most interesting if I sang the high part and she sang the lower part. That kind of blends us together. There's a lot of stuff that we admire and try to sing, like the Blue Sky Boys. The whole point to us was that they sounded like they had one mouth. They were so linked. So I think we spent a lot of years trying to just—

G.W.: Trying to literally make our vowels and move our mouths and modulate through the words exactly the same. It's so beautiful. That's one of the things I love about brother-team music. Something happens. It's almost like that tickle that happens in your ear when you hear a pennywhistle, or a bagpipe or something. There's a place in your ear that only gets tickled by that. With two voices, we call it buzz—when they *buzz*, when they *really* hook up. [*Gasps.*] It's just . . . oof!

D.R.: I remember singing with Emmylou Harris early on. I didn't realize how much of harmony singing is unconscious. I noticed about four things were happening, physiologically, without me knowing it, while I was trying to sing with her. It was like I was in a yoga pose I'd never been in, and I'm, like, *How*?

G.W.: [*Laughs.*] Never done this!

D.R.: That was a moment where I was, like, Wow, Gill and I have really matched what we're doing to each other.

G.W.: And it's true of the instruments as well. We've spent decades becoming the players we are, with each other. All you have to do is sit down with somebody else, and all of a sudden it's, like, *Oh!* Oh, all right, yeah!

D.R.: My guitar playing is entirely connected to what Gill's doing. It's one thing. I mean, I literally think of myself as the second-best guitar player in the room. What Gill does is harder to do—to play with that kind of feel and nuance on a

rhythm guitar. You can copy what I'm doing, but what she does is almost impossible to teach. It's the combination that makes it special. It's the fact that we can try to play two guitars and create a texture that doesn't sound like two guitars.

Speaking of that, I wanted to ask you about the guitar sound at the very top of "The Bells and the Birds." It's incredibly transporting, mesmerizing, rhythmic. That's just the two guitars?

G.W.: Yeah. That's two guitars. [*Laughs.*]

D.R.: Well, it would've started with Gill coming up with a finger-style guitar part of reasonable complexity.

G.W.: Probably one of the more complex parts I play.

D.R.: You were imagining trying to write something that felt a little bit like CSNY's "Guinevere."

G.W.: Something that floats. I wanted something that wasn't primitive, wasn't minimalistic.

D.R.: And you had the phrase "The Bells aAnd the Birds." I was thinking about old classical music, how they'd try to illustrate language with the instruments—I love that literalism. So I wanted there to be bell-ish sounds that went along with the title. I wanted to think about a part that would float above it. I just wanted to come up with a little part that would be chime-y and would drift and intertwine. That would have a landscape to it. We ended up recording it in a way where we used microphones between us to catch the sound already combined, as opposed to microphones closer to the guitars.

G.W.: The music had actually combined in the air before the mike picked it up. So it has that organic swirling.

In general, your work tends to be a little mournful, a little melancholic. I'm always curious about the animating impulse for songwriters—what sort of feeling, or what sort of idea, is most likely to get them to pick up a guitar or a pen. Do you find that you both tend to write through moments of contemplation or sadness more than moments of pleasure?

G.W.: Yes. Yes, for me.

D.R.: Yeah, I would agree. The songs all deal with a certain kind of melancholy something, but—

G.W.: Our narrators are never defeated. As low as they are, it's not the end. I do believe I'm an optimist. I have profound faith in the human spirit, that people can get through the unimaginable. I think that's in the songs, and it's related to us and to me and those moments when I pick up a guitar. And they do tend to be sorrowful moments. But that's just part of the human response. You don't get through something by ignoring it. You get through it by really feeling it. I have yet to find anything in my life that cannot be expressed through folk music.

I was a pretty obsessive music listener as a kid, and in a way, I think I learned what feelings were that way.

G.W.: I think about that all the time. It was my first glimpse of a world I felt like I wanted to be part of. I didn't want the boring world. I wanted the world with the drunks and the clowns and the suitcases. I had to work my way up to the more raw and primary emotions that are present in a Stanley Brothers song. That was a lot to handle. The drunk husband, the man damned to a life in jail—I had to work my way up to processing that. But now, you know, I'm kinda there. I'm a grown woman now, and—excuse my language—some shit has happened.

It seems to me as if your lyrics are a mix of pure fiction and what could maybe be called autofiction. How often are your songs rooted in personal experience?

D.R.: Sometimes you're writing a song about something completely different, and then you realize that there's an experience that you can draw upon that creates this beautifully incisive verse, and changes the course of the song. Maybe it wasn't what you were starting out to express, but all of a sudden you have this avenue to express it. I think in our world, we're not trying to . . . the things we're trying to express are always more complicated than just sitting down and saying, "I'm gonna write a song about this last experience that I had."

G.W.: That's exactly it. I feel like we're right on the bull's-eye when there's mystery. When there's mystery, we're in the right place. We can't help but put true experiences into the songs. Lately, it has seemed to me that there's no such thing as truly random. You can put eight words on the table and my brain will connect them with something true.

D.R.: There are things on this record that are incredibly autobiographical. When I say everything was colored by the experiences of the past five years, that's very true. But it narrows and obscures it to try and talk about it specifically.

Last question: what's the hardest part of doing this job, and what's the best part?

G.W.: You know, only with the onset of the pandemic did I fully realize that I had not spent a birthday at home in probably twenty-five years. And I didn't even know that I cared. But it was interesting to live in one place again. It reminded me of when we first moved to Nashville and I was getting to know Tennessee. I got to appreciate those little transitional weeks where you actually feel the seasons start to shift. And I loved that awareness. That was obliterated by life on the road. Also, when you move so much, it's hard to actually change. The world around you is changing so much that you just roll with it. But I felt, with Dave and myself, that we actually kind of changed. And that change is present in this album. It's one of my favorite things about this record. What do I love about this job? It brings me a kinship with the world. I'm a very solitary person, and I have virtually no family.

Content

The music, and the people that hear our music, that's probably my No. 1 anchor to the world.

D.R.: The hardest part for me is not being able to focus on one thing. That's what being a musician has become. Forty years ago, you could drive into Laurel Canyon and be a decent songwriter, and there was an entire infrastructure in place.

G.W.: All you had to do was play guitar and sing.

D.R.: But at this point, you have to wear a hundred hats, and it's very, very difficult. I don't like shifting gears. The flip side of this is that I've been able to experience all of these separate careers. All of a sudden being like, O.K., I have to stay up to write string parts, and I have to learn how to do that. What a wonderful thing to have the opportunity to do in your life. There's something really amazing about the size and complexity of the world that we've built around ourselves. But then when we go out and play shows, it's just the vehicle that we're driving, it's a couple guitars and a couple notebooks, a garment bag—

Headline

G.W.: A suit and a dress.

Content

D.R.: And you stand up onstage in front of all these people and play. It's such an honor to have all of your energy focussed on this one thing that you care about so much. And to know that all the work you've done in the past—all the thinking about what the next line's going to be, or what the next story you're going to tell is, or what the next note you're gonna play is, or what you played last night that really was fun and you need to remember how to do that again because people enjoyed it so much and you enjoyed it, that you have this North Star. It's unreal.

G.W.: It's so heartening that, with everything that's going on in everybody's lives and in the world, people still feel that impulse. They still want to go and sit in a dark room and listen to people sing. ♦

heading
More New Yorker Conversations

Content

- Naomi Klein sees uncanny doubles in our politics.

heading
- Olivia Rodrigo considers the meanings of “Guts.”
- Isabel Allende’s vision of history.

heading
- Julia Fox didn’t want to be famous, but she knew she would be.
- John Waters is ready for his Hollywood closeup.

heading
- Patrick Stewart boldly goes there.

advertisement
Support *The New Yorker’s* award-winning journalism. Subscribe today.

authors
Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records.”

small
More: Folk Music Artists Nashville
small
Tennessee Music, Musicians

other
READ MORE

small
THE LEDE
heading
The Story That “Hillbilly Elegy” Doesn’t Tell

Like many memoirs, J. D. Vance’s book misses a few details, some of which complicate the story upon

which he has based much of his politics.

By Jessica Winter

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

Democracy Needs the Loser

The observance of defeat, especially in an election, is often all that keeps a state from tipping into violence.

By Barbara F. Walter

THE POLITICAL SCENE

Why Was It So Hard for the Democrats to Replace Biden?

After the President's debate with Trump, Democratic politicians felt paralyzed. At the D.N.C., they felt giddy relief. How did they do it?

By Andrew Marantz

LETTER FROM BIDEN'S WASHINGTON

The Speech of Kamala Harris's Lifetime

The Democratic Presidential nominee leaves Chicago with her party united, but Donald Trump is not yet defeated.

By Susan B. Glasser