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Inner Phoenix: Interview with Derek Menchan

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, January 8th, 2020

Derek Menchan, music producer, multi-instrumentalist, singer, doctoral candidate, visual artist, philosopher, and Humanities professor, always has something cooking on the stove, metaphorically speaking. CW's Eileen Murphy talks with Derek to find out what he's been up to.

Eileen Murphy (EM): You're taking a semester off to pursue recording of your second album. I can appreciate that the whole recording process is super-discreet. But what *can* you tell me about it?

Derek Menchan (DM): Well, I am taking time off for more than just the record. While I am working on album number two, I am also experiencing what it feels like to be at the zenith of what I want to do, as a prof. Basically, I have achieved all the goals I set for myself there, and, as such, would like to set my sights on other arenas in which I can grow and learn. I have always felt myself to be the host of an inner phoenix; it alternately hibernates and actuates, with no prodding by me. Its actuation has in the past moved me to change pursuits, locales, and jobs. It is opening again and moving me to explore and create. All I can say of the album at this point is that it is scary how good it is becoming and is a logical follow-up to my first; it'll be twice as big.

EM: You call yourself a multi-instrumentalist. How is this ability to play more than one musical instrument important to you and your art?

DM: Well, because I play more than one instrument, it helps immensely because, as was the case with, say, Beethoven, ideas come to me, often finished and already fully orchestrated. Issue is, neither you nor anyone else can hear them, 'til I take what I can "hear" in the aether and render it so we can all partake of it. That rendering can be particularly grueling, and my ability to play multiple instruments lightens the load, a bit. I have that many more means or angles by which, either, to come at, or view the piece, in vitro. I am an orchestra.

EM: What was your childhood like? For example, were you considered a child prodigy? In what ways did your childhood create the artist you are today?

DM: I guess I have been reading since at least age three, and have been writing essays, drawing, and doing music since about age three or four. The first time I saw photos of the work of the Italian Renaissance artists, I fell in love with the grandeur and majesty of it, especially Michelangelo, and wanted to create works with that power.

I expressed this to my parents, and they said I could. It was that simple, actually. I was never told I had creative limits, and none were imposed upon me, as a youth. My parents supported and encouraged all my burgeoning artistic pursuits. So, I set out to create, and some first-rate pieces came from my childhood.

It appears that my parents knew I was a prodigy—a polymath—but kept mum on it. I was the anti-Mozart: the prodigy who was never told he was a prodigy. Hence, I never developed arrogance about my gifts, merely a love and appreciation of and for them; I have had to grow and learn of myself and the breadth of my gifts as I evolve. My parents were brilliant for this.

I can recall that, at age 13, I was winning art contests with my drawings, receiving the highest honors in musical competitions, and writing essays to accompany my visual art.

Adulthood eventually came upon me and, thus, the concomitant need to work, etc. Few and far between became the times I would be immersed in my creative processes. After I finished grad school and was eventually hired as a prof, I became gravely concerned that I, an artist, was barely creating work. I was sort of doing it as a hobby. That's a big no-no for me; I am an artist who has a complementary hustle as a prof. So, I made moves to carve out more and more time for my necessary pursuits. Now that I've done that, I am experiencing a renaissance; I feel exactly as I did when I was 13.

EM: What obstacles did you face and overcome on the journey to where you are now (let's call where you are today "success," since that's what your achievements say to me, although I've learned that the definition of "success" is very personal)?

DM: Wow, *this* is success?! ** Chuckling** I am Nietzschean enough to acknowledge only one source of competition in the world: myself. I never, and I mean NEVER create art with an eye toward compensation or recognition. I pay attention, when in the throes of inspiration/creation, solely to the fulfilment of my vision.

As Quincy Jones says, when the inspired creative does that, remuneration and reputation inevitably follow. It is the world, channeling and acknowledging itself and its inner genius, through the artist, and has less to do with the particular artist than it does with the zeitgeist the artist hosts. We creatives just have to learn to get out of the way and let the process do what it does.

That said, I got in my own way, big time. The biggest threat to my well-being is my addictive personality, and that led me on quite the circuitous route. I regret none of my travails and what I learned of myself from them, however, and none of this is kept from my work. My caricatures are not so much cartoonish replications of individuals, but rather psycho-spiritual representations of people. My *mruzick* is what happens when C grade 60s horror films meet sunny ballads and Atomic Age parlor songs. Frightening, silly, weird shit, man.

The primary takeaway from this is that the successful person must get to know and be true, to and about, one's inner self. Denial is, both, seemingly pernicious and contagious, and needs to be avoided like the Plague.

EM: What's an ordinary, typical day like for you (although surely you'll never be merely "typical")?

DM: ** Smiles** I wake up and, if I have been working on some concept, the thoughts wake me and I imagine persons, most often my students, in my home, that I can debate the topic with. This ideation accompanies me into and out of the shower, then it's time to go to work. I wind up at my job, where I spend as much time as I can exploring mystical concepts with some special friends of mine—fellow employees at the school. Then it's back home, to read, practice, make music, etc. Add to all this that I am the primary caretaker of my dear mother, aged 90, who lives with me.

EM: I'm curious about the saying *ars longa vita brevis* ["art is long, life is short"]. Have you embraced this bit of Ancient Greek wisdom handed down to us from the Romans and if so, why?

DM: I have, indeed, embraced this wisdom. For me it's simple. When I see Muslims pray, I see them end their *salaat* by addressing the beings on their right and left shoulders. These are their *genii*—their "good" and "bad" spirits that accompany them everywhere they go. Singular, that's *genius*.

If one doesn't do right by one's genius, it can cause deep anguish. I have often felt as if I live with this parasite. It's a little creature who burrows deep in your mind, and whispers to you all the secrets of the ultimate reality. I told you of it: it is my inner phoenix. It causes me to go into fits and starts of creation, and when I forget I am to essentially serve it, asserts itself in the most aggressive and painful ways.

But my inner phoenix allows me to create things greater than myself, which, I believe, will still be relevant when I am gone. As Blake says, "...I shall not reason and compare; my job is to create." My life, then, will be comparatively short. But art, in general, and the art—in specific, that was entrusted to come through me, during my existence—will live long.



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Derek's website: www.derekmenchan.com

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This entry was posted on Wednesday, January 8th, 2020 at 10:14 am and is filed under [Music](#), [Visual Art](#)

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