

Sheryl Crow: for mover and shaker Sheryl Crow, it's always "art that moves the molecules." And she's moving them, one record at a time. (Interview).

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Sheryl Crow's professional career has already been a long and winding road. But recently, it seems to have lead to nothing but roses--or, more specifically, Wildflower (A&M), the title of her latest record. Her previous album, C'mon, C'mon (2002), was a huge success, and for the past several years the singer-songwriter has been involved with one of the world's most visible professional athletes-- champion cyclist Lance Armstrong. Crow claims the song "Wildflower" was inspired by their relationship and that she chose the album's title and prevailing image because of its ability to bloom even in the midst of chaos. Writer and interviewer JT Leroy checked in with Crow while she was in France to cheer on Armstrong as he competed in the Tour de France, which he went on to win for a record seventh time.

SHERYL CROW: Hey, JT! How are you? JT LEROY: I'm nervous!

SC: Oh, don't be. I'm a walk in the park.

JL: [laughs] Well, it's because I've grown up with your work. I remember my mom liked that song "Leaving Las Vegas" a lot because it had this traveling-wanderlust thing that she related to. Anyway, I was reading an interview with you where you talked about acting. Have you done more since you did 54 [1998]?

SC: Just The Minus Man [1999] with Dwight Yoakam and Owen Wilson. I played a heroin addict, and I die in the first five or six minutes. [laughs] I think I was overlooked for a Best Supporting Actress nod, but whatever. The only other thing was De-Lovely, a biopic about Cole Porter in which I'm a torch singer in a club. It was cool, because I grew up loving song and dance movies, all the stuff with Judy Garland, Rosemary Clooney, and Gene Kelly, so this was really fun because I got to step into that role for a minute without the pressure of having to act.

JL: I could really see you getting down and dirty in an indie film.

SC: I'd love to do one, but I've always felt like the camera wasn't really my friend. You have to be so uninhibited and able to lose yourself, and for me, that's really difficult. I'm always extremely conscious that there's a camera on me.

JL: Even when you're singing a song?

SC: When I'm singing it's easy, because that's my element ... Oh, Lance just walked in.

JL: Can I say hi?

SC: Absolutely. Hang on a second.

LANCE ARMSTRONG: Hello?

JL: Hello, sir! It's an honor to talk to you. In a book I inscribed to someone, I included a quote from you in which you say, "My job is to suffer; I make the suffering in training hard so that the races are not full of suffering." I have it on my computer now.

LA: Oh, cool!

JL: Do you ever sing one of Sheryl's songs while you're pedaling?

LA: [laughs] Well, yeah, sometimes. All right, I'll talk to you soon, JT. Here's Sheryl.

JL: All right! [to Crow] You know, I heard you interviewed once on VH1 or something, and you were talking about the creation of this song ... I can't remember the name, but it goes: [Leroy hums a tune]

SC: Oh, was it "Riverwide"?--"I spent a year in the mouth of a whale"? JL: Uh-huh.

SC: Yeah. Actually a string arrangement from [singer-songwriter] Bobble Gentry was one of the inspirations for "Riverwide," but the actual idea for the song was inspired by this Walt Whitman poem in Leaves of Grass. There are a few places I'll always go to before I sit down and write a record--one is Bob Dylan's lyrics, and the other is Walt Whitman, as well as a few other writers I try to tap into. You get inspiration where you can. I feel like a real snob about my references, but I was raised with people that just loved music and gravitated to good melodies and intelligent lyrics, and my parents were--and still are--avid conversationalists. Meal time has always been a social event for our family.

JL: Y'all sat down and had dinner together?

SC: Every night at six o'clock. I've been asked a lot lately about the inspiration for this new record, which came from being just barraged with so many images; the news is 24 hours now. As a result, you get really desensitized--it wipes out whatever's going on emotionally from your mind or spirit. When we were kids, every night at six o'clock Walter Cronkite came on--it really made an impact on you because at dinnertime the world would enter your tiny little village, and you would talk about what was going on in the world. Now we don't really experience that because there's so much information coming at us all the time.

JL: Yeah. It scares me, because storytelling is changing. It's easy to look at things on the outside and say how people aren't getting the same kind of experiences we did, but somehow people manage to get them anyway. I just think it's about whether they want it or not.

SC: When there's so much chaos, people are apt to either be motivated to do something or go to sleep. We need to look at why reality TV is so successful, why our pop stars are 19 years old and coming off of contest TV shows, and why we don't invest emotionally in writers and artists. You can look at it negatively, but analyzing it is what could ultimately bring about a massive paradigm shift. It's in times like these that you find an underground movement of great art, of great expression, because there is always a need for that, and I think we're slowly coming out of this sleep period where people are starting to ask for something to soothe the soul. It's slow, but I definitely see it around me--I see people expressing their unhappiness in America about the war

much more than they did before the election. The same people who want to buy things that are good for them will also hopefully demand better TV programming and moviemaking. Historically, there have always been these shifts in consciousness.

JL: I know when I'm feeling overwhelmed and beaten down I have the temptation to take the softer, easier route.

SC: There's just too much of everything. At a certain point everything starts to eat itself, and it becomes counterproductive, and you wind up checking out. But I'm always optimistic that good comes from bad, and you have to find that faith in there somewhere.

JL: It's amazing how many people who have the opportunity to have a voice don't use it.

SC: Well, our society has changed so much. Technology has not only been embraced by our culture, it's been incorporated into our daily living, affecting our ability to have relationships with people and our sense of village and community. When I was a kid we wrote letters--there was a documenting of history there. The kids today are instead growing up with computers, which I think robs them of the social experience. We've found a thousand different ways to communicate with each other without ever having human contact. But as an artist I know that, no matter what--to rip off Santana--it's art that moves the molecules. There will never be a time when real melody and content-driven music is not craved, because we are all made of the same human spirit, and we all experience the same kind of suffering and wondering. That for me is the impetus for keeping at it all these years--that I know in my heart that my best work is ahead of me and that there is a demand for songwriters in general.

JL: Well, speaking of which, we were listening to your new record last night, and I was like, "God, this sounds like a movie!" It's got a real peacefulness, and it sounds orchestrated like a movie soundtrack.

SC: That's good--it's definitely orchestrated, and that was with intent. I guess what I do when I go in to make a record is have a template of four or five records, or a pretty clear idea of what guidelines I want to stay within. I don't always hit the marks, but I always know what kind of record I want to be making.

JL: What were the guidelines for this one?

SC: Well, because we'd come off of the greatest hits [The Very Best of Sheryl Crow, 2003] and it had done really well, it gave me the freedom to start over with the second half of my career and try something that didn't sound like the rest of my records. So I started off wanting to do something timeless like [Neil Young's] Harvest [1972], where you feel like the artist is having an intimate conversation with the listener. I wanted to make a record in which the vocals, the lyrics, and the melody are compelling and engrossing, and then add to that the cinematography of orchestration. I hired David Campbell to do the string arrangements, and it worked out great. What made this so wonderful was not needing to have a single, as well as not having anybody breathing down my neck, including myself, to follow up "Soak Up the Sun" or "The First Cut Is the Deepest."

JL: One thing I always notice about your records, and that comes through with this one as well, is that they sound so warm.

SC: We always tape first and run everything through good vintage gear. It's a great way to capture all the different takes and put the best parts of each together, so you get the best nuances.

JL: Oh, I can hear it. It's like if you bring in a great chef but give him regular ingredients, it's just not going to taste the same.

SC: Yeah, I know that the tape is eventually going to become a CD, but there's just something about the needle hitting the warmth of the groove of a record. In my mind you're never going to have that with a CD.