

Song of Herself

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Sheryl Crow reflects on a lifetime of broken hearts, professional victories, and the music she's made along the way. By Judy Bachrach

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just want to tell you how much I admire you," Barbera Libis, the music segment producer for Jay Leno, tells Sheryl Crow after a rehearsal on the Tonight Show set. Crow has just finished performing "Good Is Good," a catchy song, which is by no means her favorite ("Because to me it was just verging on that pop-crap thing," she confides later in her dressing room. But, she adds, "I feel OK about it").

"The way you've led your life, the way you found happiness and love now, at this time of your life...well, it's an inspiration to all the rest of us," the producer concludes while gazing at her role model.

By "now" and "this time of your life" she means that Crow, the ageless rocker, is 44, although, in front of the guitar guys playing backup, neither woman will utter that number. Still, such effusion hits its mark. Inside her dressing room, Crow smiles and-unusual for her-launches into an interview brimming with confidences.

No subject is off-limits. The difficulty of aging, past loves, wounded pride, grief, approaching marriage, and fresh prospects: They're all on the table. The singer who once declared that all she wants to do "is have some fun" has indeed found love with cyclist Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France champion and cancer survivor, who is one of the world's most famous athletes. In his honor, Crow calls her newest and most introspective album Wildflower, a bloom that thrives on hardscrabble soil.

Armstrong and Crow will marry, she says, and live in Austin-his town. In silent assent, a multifaceted diamond the shape of a prayer rug beams from her left hand.

"It's called a cushion cut," she says. She takes another peek, her large, pale eyes, set in a prominently boned face, unreadable. Her naturally curly hair has been blow-dried straight, so that now, at 11 a.m., she looks scrubbed and raw. Four-inch-high Yves Saint Laurent sandals meant to counterfeit some height are the main nod to vanity. For the rest, everything about Crow appears fragile: her fingers and wrists, the body that weighs barely 103 pounds, despite her best efforts with bags of Lay's potato chips. Nonetheless:

"I'm in the happiest stage of my life."

Happier, I wonder, than when she was in her 30s?

A swift nod. "When you're in your 30s, you're still trying to matter in the universe. And really-the universe starts inside. You create your own universe." She is a former drum majorette from Kennett, Missouri, an environment that promotes this sort of perky thinking. Her mother, a pianist who taught music, and her father, who played the trumpet, expected all four Crow children to play the piano.

"Sheryl, that's James Taylor, that's not your lesson," Bernice Crow used to scold her daughter, whose favorite reading matter in adolescence was Rolling Stone magazine. These days, Sheryl views those teenage fan days with significant nostalgia. "When I was a kid, there weren't these huge celebrity vehicles like VH1, tabloid-y papers; we weren't so familiar with these people back then," Crow recalls. "There was definitely a lot more mystery. And glamour," she adds, her tone wistful.

It was not the promise of early fame that enticed her into rock stardom. "Fame-it was not what I wanted," she says, disgusted. "That reeks of a fresh coat of paint that will chip, and people will see the chips and then abandon you. I wanted to be heard. I wanted to be important, and that's a curse in itself, because you can never really reach the place where you feel: OK, I've made it. I am the full artist."

And yet fame is exactly what she has achieved. Crow is a singer/songwriter/celebrity with nine Grammys and albums that have sold more than 25 million copies, which means, as she herself observes, "I am so used to defining myself by my productivity! And by my successes." So sometimes, sure enough, she is quite content. Crow counts as friends Gwyneth Paltrow (who sang backup for her on "This Is Love"), Stevie Nicks, and Hillary and Bill Clinton. She has written songs for Celine Dion and partnered with Kid Rock.

And at other times, despite the glamour, the high-profile dalliances, the big money, the wardrobe, and the acclaim, she has been in total despair, without a doubt. After all, it wasn't simply the desire to be important that propelled Crow to the fore of the music world. "I think the idea of having total abandon on stage, and just being able to exude sexuality and conveying passion was it- when you're a teenager, you're flaming with that anyway, you know," she explains. "Which is why rock is so great for teenagers!"

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y her mid-20s, Crow was teaching music in a St. Louis public school. Even then she was a veteran of a failed romance, her fiance a believer in fairly straitlaced notions of religion ("If you stand up in front of the Lord and say you are going to be my wife, and then you sing in bands every weekend, we're not going to make it," she says he informed her at the time).

Then she got lucky. For warbling a few notes of a McDonald's commercial, Crow received the munificent sum of \$40,000-"Forty minutes of work which brought me more than I made in two years of teaching," she says. "But it was a chunk of cash that made me fool enough to think I could go to Los Angeles and start singing. So I went to L.A. in a Renault Alliance, which I don't think they even make anymore. I remember going through the mountains and barely making it up."

At her destination, she scanned the classifieds, ending up with two perfect strangers as roommates, one a costume designer for Van Halen. "That was in their spandex days," she recalls dryly. "So that was a pretty wild household for a while."

By 1988, Crow was a new woman with a memorable gig: Poured into a tiny black dress, curly hair that was bleached, sprayed, and frizzed into the shape of a lamp shade, she was singing backup on tour for Michael Jackson. Whose baby, one tabloid proclaimed, she was carrying.

She rolls her eyes. "Well, that definitely had my hometown on its ear," she recalls. "But in hindsight, I now think a lot of those stories were planted by Jackson's people, in order to keep Michael associated with love and attractive women. They said he was

having a birthday party for me. Which was true-but he didn't come! He didn't even know my name."

With the Bad tour over, she found herself back in Los Angeles, considerably less attractive ("After all that bleaching, I had only a few hairs left," she recalls) and less flush. She was a waitress with no future. And she crashed.

"What people didn't tell me was when you come off the road, that's the nature of coming off the road. You've been in this whirlwind situation. You have to totally reacclimate to the reality of being at home. It was difficult for me to make that transition. I thought, Gosh, I don't know what to do with myself anymore. And I didn't really feel like doing anything."

In old newspaper clippings, rumors of Crow's stabs at mood elevation tend toward the classic: alcohol-fueled jam sessions with her rocker pals (who called themselves the Tuesday Night Music Club). "In the making of the first record we definitely drank; there were nights of staying out late and tequila and stuff," she recalls, before adding: "But heavy drinking? No."

That first record, also called Tuesday Night Music Club, was the making of Crow. It went multiplatinum, earned her three Grammys (including best new artist)-and the enduring bitterness of many members of the group, who were left behind in the dust. "Oh, absolutely, it did in a lot of my friendships with those people," Crow says. "I was so anxious for everyone to be taken care of that I split all the publishing rights equal ways, and everyone got pretty wealthy. But it seemed to me they became insanely jealous that they weren't in the limelight."

It got even worse than insane. In May 1996, Kevin Gilbert, Crow's former boyfriend from the group, was found dead of what the coroner determined was "autoerotic asphyxiation."

"Yeah, but that had nothing to do with me. I hadn't seen him in years," she says. "He was a disturbed young man." You sure know how to pick them, it is suggested. Crow waves a dismissive hand.

"Well, you know how it's really like an actress who gets involved with her leading man? It has nothing to do with reality," she says. "You know, the project ends; the relationship ends. And then somebody has hurt feelings."

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ften that wounded somebody turns out to be Crow herself. Yet she has a way of transmuting heartbreak into gold-or platinum. "My Favorite Mistake," Crow's preferred song, is widely assumed to be about Eric Clapton; by the time the two hooked up in 1996, Clapton was an icon, while Crow, for her part, was a crossover queen, drifting regally from rock to pop. Both were at the top of their form.

But a cursory examination of Crow's lyrics after the couple broke up in 1996 ("I made up the bed we sleep in/I looked at the clock when you creep in/It's 6 a.m. and I'm alone") reveals a certain chill setting in. And besides that, the guy was 17 years her senior. Older men famously like to be in control of young women, she is reminded.

"Yeah," she agrees. "And he's English, too. That's the role they like to play." From then on, it seems, the singer has been drawn to younger men. First came the blond, tousled, then-34-year-old actor Owen Wilson, with his exquisitely wrecked nose, for whom she fell much too hard. Following that flameout, Crow was about as shattered as she had been a decade earlier, during her first bout of depression. But it was by no means the only event that brought her low. The singer had just turned 40.

"It felt catastrophic," Crow recalls. "My career was becoming more ageist, more youth-oriented. I remember trying to make myself work and really not getting anywhere. And I was pretty miserable. And a dear friend of mine"-who happened to be Chrissie Hynde, lead singer of the Pretenders-"came down, and Chrissie said, 'Look here now, there's no pressure here. Music is not your life,'" Crow recalls. "She said, 'Your life is your life. Music is something you do.' So I stopped working, something the doctor should have ordered to begin with." She pauses. "You know, I felt the pressure. The pressure to compete in a very young market."

Time and again, the career-corroding subject of age comes up.

Equally abrasive for Crow is its converse—the eruption of ever-more-nubile rivals in the music industry, some barely of voting age.

"I think there will hopefully be a paradigm shift," she says. "And as the world becomes more chaotic, it's going to become more difficult to listen to what a 19-year-old has to say about the world." Nor is this her only grievance about younger singers. For flaunting sexuality before adoring minors, Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears have been on the receiving end of her scalding criticism; this, despite some of Crow's own history of wardrobe selections, several of which could pass for lingerie. A shrug. "Now, a couple of videos I've done, I've worn low-slung jeans or whatever, so I can visit that world, because I'm a woman and proud of my body," she acknowledges. "But when I got started, that kind of image was a deterrent. You wanted to become a serious singer? Then you didn't want to be a sexpot. I think if I were trying to become an artist now, I wouldn't be able to do it."

It is the prepubescent target audience of today's idols that most alarms her, along with the message. "I don't think it's empowering to do whatever we want—it's the exact opposite," she declares. "It started with the Madonna sexual revolution, and now it's everywhere. Because not only is it really propagating early sexual activity, it's also kind of defining what beauty is, and also defining it for boys as well as girls," she continues. "I mean, what's wrong with being a flat-chested girl? I think boys should feel good about the option of dating a girl who doesn't have big boobs!"

Does that mean a giant boob enhancement isn't in Crow's near future? "Not today," is her acid reply. "No, the plastic-surgery thing is probably not my bag, ever." Wrinkle fillers? She laughs outright. "I didn't know what a filler was until two weeks ago, when someone told me about it at a photo shoot." Despite her fear of time's ravages, she has evidently decided not to war with them: so negligent about applying sunblock that she's had to have basal cells removed from her face; so indifferent to the judgment of mirrors that she arrives at NBC enhanced by nothing more than a smudge of Lancome mascara and translucent lip gloss that disappears by the time she polishes off a tuna sandwich. She could be any age. "Good genes," is her explanation.

More than two years ago, at a charity event in Las Vegas, Crow met Lance Armstrong, a decade her junior. A brief flirtation conducted over BlackBerry, a short visit, and then: "That was that," she reports. "I knew it after a couple of weeks." The ten years that separate them? Not an issue. "In his life, Lance has lived many lifetimes," Crow says.

At the time of their encounter, Armstrong had recovered from testicular cancer, was still married (but estranged from his wife), and the father of three very small children. Not an auspicious set of circumstances for a new relationship.

"To be honest, I don't feel like it was the most perfect setup," Crow agrees. "I was getting involved with someone in the middle of his divorce who was just getting acclimated to being a single dad. But we just were in sync. It was a very comfortable relationship, and we're all in a really healthy place."

And exactly how comfortable and healthy was their new love, I wonder, for Lance's wife, Kristin, to whom he'd been married for five years?

She considers this. "I will say one thing. I can completely imagine it is not a very easy thing for her to know her ex-husband is getting involved with someone who is high-profile, because you cannot get away from it. I feel I can relate to that. I can look at it now by how I would feel."

Crow was at Armstrong's side constantly during the cyclist's victorious Tour de France races, waving him off with a kiss and greeting him on his return. She wasn't exactly in the shadows-that would have been impossible given the couple's high-wattage status-but for a year the limelight was his.

"Really it was just a gift I was giving myself, to reboot," she says. "I guess I had moments of panic, when I thought, How am I going to get back to doing what I used to do? And, Am I ever going to want to get back to doing what I used to do?" She shrugs. "So that was definitely a challenge. It's definitely a challenge to be the less visible of the two when you're used to being visible. But it was good for me. It was a strong reminder of who I am, who I was before I started this.... I want to be with Lance; I want to be where he is." By this, Crow means eternally. Literally. When they die, she insists, "We'll have somebody ride up and sprinkle us over the Alps."

Recently, Armstrong was by her side on her tour, she recalls, his expression one of solemn devotion. Yes, they are considering children of their own, she says. "But we want some adult time first." And then she adds, looking truly crestfallen, there's the matter of her age.

So even paradise has its pitfalls. "You know, this record isn't selling nearly as well as any other record I did," Crow confides with remarkable candor. "And I knew that it wouldn't because of the kind of record it is. Lance and I discussed this a year ago: I said, 'How will I feel when it doesn't sell ten million records?'"

This is never how she imagined the music world would be as a teenager. "It's much more about the dollar." Another shrug. "So it wasn't what I expected. But I will say I was lucky. I got in under the wire."

And there she intends to stay for some time. She may be the darling of women past 30, who reflect with special loathing on each new birthday and old boyfriend. But for herself, Crow is under no illusions. "Am I going to want to be on the road when I'm 50 or 60? Fifty, maybe. Sixty, no," she concludes. "But there are ways to stay vital. Because I'm a curious person, I will always be in search of the perfect song." She smiles gently. "And I haven't written it yet."