



Reflections of a Songwriter: *Shantell Ogden's Journey*

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Shantell Ogden has been a serious songwriter for over seven years. She has been publicly performing in coffee houses and restaurants for well over a year. When I asked her when she knew she wanted to be a songwriter, she quickly set the misconception straight. She said the question isn't "when did I know I wanted to be a songwriter." The question is "when did I discover I **was** a songwriter." Shantell says, "It's not something I set out to be. It's not something I set out to do. It's just something I am." These are the reflections of a writer's journey to fervently dig within the caverns of her very soul and unearth the writer within.

DISCOVERING SELF

Q: EB White, who wrote, *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*, along with other famous writers – this is from a book, it's called "The Fears of Writing" – are plagued with writing anxiety. This is sometimes termed Page Fright. He said, "I admire anybody who has the guts to write anything at all." How does anxiety stack up in your task as a writer?

A: *Anxiety is a big problem. I think anyone who says that it is not isn't putting anything that is real out there. A lot of my anxieties [surround the thoughts] "is it going to be good enough," "are people going to be able to relate to it," or "am I saying something here that is in some way unique, even if it's expressing a very age old feeling in a different way." I have anxieties about not being able to finish songs. I'll start writing something, and then sometimes it won't come out. And, sometimes I have anxieties that I have all these unfinished songs that I can't even seem to finish.*

Q: So, it's typical to have an unfinished song?

A: *It is for me.*

Q: That's my struggle. I will write different pieces, but I can't seem to finish a song. So how do you get past that? Because obviously you have, you've finished enough songs to do a CD.

A: *I came to accept that not every thing I wrote could turn into a song. And, sometimes the songs I wrote wouldn't stick. In other words, I'd finish a song, but I realized it wasn't something that I even really wanted to perform. They just don't stick to me in any way. They don't hit me in any way. They don't follow me in any way throughout my day. Often, the songs I really like – the ones that I sing randomly throughout the day and [seem to form a connection] – are the ones I perform. The songs that I don't connect with are the songs that I usually don't perform. Or maybe I will perform them a couple of times, and then I just put them away and never play them again.*

But going back to the anxiety, I just kind of accepted that A). I'm not going to finish everything I write. And, I'm still always going to have that box, those fragments of thoughts, of lyrics, of phrases . . . and they will always be there. B). Not everything I write, even though I finish it, is going to be good enough to put onto an album.

As a songwriter, I don't have a lot of the normal anxieties that a songwriter who did it for a living would have. I don't have to write a song to get on the radio and to survive. It's a little different scenario.

Q: Do you want that scenario, that lifestyle? Is this what your goal is?

A: *I've thought about what I want to do with my music. I'm a very driven person; people who know me know that's absolutely evident in every part of my life. I've never looked at songwriting like a job. I don't know that I would want it to be a job. It's my outlet. I have a full-time job in marketing and write a lot of business writing. Songwriting is my outlet; it's my hobby; it's what I do for my inside.*

Q: Have you ever read Keyes book on writing anxiety?

A: *I'm not going to read that book.*

Q: Why don't you want to read Keyes book?

A: *I think it's bad to dwell on the bad parts of writing. If you pick apart a piece for too long, overanalyzing it, all you end up with is a better explanation of a problem you already knew existed.*

If I were inclined to do reading, I'd read about the writers I liked. [This would be the way I] could see [what good songwriting is].

Q: In your song, "The Road to Happiness is Not a Highway," you said that, while the chorus is not a direct quote from your parents, they did give you similar advice, which inspired the song. What was the actual advice your parents gave you?

A: *The one thing my parents taught me more than anything is that I can do anything that I wanted to do. As long as I put forth the effort, I could have it. [But, effort is the operative word]. I might have to really struggle. But, at the end of the day, I would get what I was after.*

I come from a family of cowboys and rural people. My dad always says "cowboy up." In our family, that meant "don't give up." I heard that often growing up. I resented that for a long time; I felt like I could never be discouraged because it wasn't allowed. However, [this extreme has helped to give me the determination and persistence I possess today. As a result, I don't always] feel down or beaten.

Q: Eudora Welty said her parental support and upbringing helped enlarge her experience and view of the world enabling her to be a better writer. Her parents were progressive people giving her the opportunity to read a wide-range of literature and to travel. Has your realm of experience broadened your knowledge base?

A: *Absolutely. One of the things that my parents gave me was a love of learning. Growing up, I always read books. Even though I lived in a small town, my parents provided me with the opportunity to travel. We went on family vacations. In high school, I won several trips through various youth organizations to such places as Washington DC, Kansas City, Chicago, Denver,*

and Los Angeles. When I was a freshman in college, I spent six weeks in Denmark as a college exchange student. Currently, my job entails extensive travel. Certainly, coming from a small town, traveling has helped me get a larger worldview.

I'm the kind of person who always has to be learning and taking in something new. I'm a complex person.

During the day, I am a businesswoman. Other times, I do the singer/songwriter thing. I'm very active in my religion and that's a whole other part of me. One time in my life I was a cowgirl and competed in rodeos. There was a time when I did beauty pageants to gain experience.

Q: Reba McEntire is very busy like that too. She has said that she compartmentalizes. When she is acting in her new TV role, she is Reba the actress. When she performs her music, she is Reba the singer. When she's with her son, she is Reba the mom. Do you compartmentalize your life or do you carry over all of your experiences? Are you the same Shantell businesswoman as Shantell songwriter?

A: *I'm compartmentalized to the greatest extent. Yet, I don't want to say that I am not the same person. Because there was a time when I was very uncomfortable with the notion of compartmentalizing. I felt like I was acting. I felt like I didn't know what direction to go, so I became a chameleon.*

Eventually, I came to terms with all of these compartments of my life. I can function well in all of these compartments.

Q: So, basically you're saying that doing these certain tasks you use these skill sets? And, when I do this, I use other needed skill sets?

A: *Yes, I do. But, there is crossover. The fact that I am very driven and a go-getter feed into everything. The fact that I really try to work on my relationship with God feeds into everything.*

Sometimes, I'll be at work in the business role and the songwriter wants to come out. Or when I try to be a songwriter, I'll find myself thinking too linear like a businessperson. So, sometimes a battle ensues. However, most of the time, I can function well in all of these areas.

Q: How much time do you spend on songwriting?

A: *I couldn't even begin to give you a number.*

Q: Do you have a certain day set aside that is your songwriting day?

A: *No, for me it just comes when it comes. Sometimes, the song will come when I'm on my way to the post office, and I have to pull over to the side of the road and write it. Sometimes, it will come at midnight on Sunday, when I [desperately] want to go to bed, but I can't. If I don't write the song when the [sensation hits], it's not coming out. It's not something that I control. It controls me.*

SHARING SELF

Q: What was the pivot point that helped you to open up and share your songs publicly?

A: *I think I reached a certain level of comfort with myself that I had never reached before. I reached it about 1-1/2 years ago when I moved from Oregon to Atlanta. One day, I was walking around the town square in Dahlonega, and I saw an advertisement for a singer/songwriter-sharing circle. [And, it piqued my interest].*

I had sung some songs for friends of mine singing them kind of jokingly, messing around. I had written one song called "Story of Independence." This was the song I took to my first songwriter circle. It took me so much courage to go there and do that. And, it was such a small step. But, I think I had healed to the point, with everything in my life, to feel capable of taking that step. I went into that room, and I just shook [intensely]. The group consisted of three or four people who were also singer/songwriters. Had they not been immediately accepting and supportive and complimentary – had that not been a safe place, I don't know how long it would have taken me to get up the courage again. [Maybe I wouldn't have even wanted to do it again, period].

Q: In that environment, do you just listen to each other's music or do you give constructive feedback?

A: *We do both. It's much more of a supporting kind of atmosphere because the world is full of critics. That's no secret to anyone who is musically inclined. In fact, it's no secret to anyone who puts anything out there. You'll have ten people say they like your stuff and ten people say they hate your stuff. As a result, the songwriter circle is more of a supporting environment. There have been times where we have specifically asked people for feedback. On the other hand, it doesn't really come unsolicited.*

Q: Where do you get your feedback to know if something is going to have a universal appeal? Do you get it partly from that group? Do you get it from the feelings and receptiveness perceived from the audience? Or is it just kind of a gut, internal thing?

A: *It's a combination of all three. I'll write something, and I'll play it back. I'll say, "Yeah, that is a good song." I'll try it at the songwriter group, and then I'll try it at one of my gigs to see if the audience will like it. It's interesting.*

I did a bit of market surveying because my professional job is marketing. So, I did a market survey to see what songs to put on this album. I had more material than I wanted to put on the album. I just wasn't sure which songs people would really like. It really didn't matter to me. I had some that I just didn't feel one way or the other about. So, some friends of mine came over. I played the songs. Then, I had them rank them in order of which ones they liked best. And, it varied a lot, as one would expect. However, there were three or four songs that consistently came back that people really liked. They were the same songs that [people responded favorably to] at my gigs. So that determined not only what songs would appear on the album based on the all the material I had but also what order they should go in.

There are different schools of thought [in relation to song order]. Some suggest you do three or four of the same key. Others suggest one fast and two slow. Or you might mix them up a bit. If you have never really done it before, you don't know what the studio experience is like.

Q: Is there material you read to learn these processes?

A: *I haven't read a book on songwriting. And, I probably should. I probably would get a lot better at it.*

I've talked to a couple of professional songwriters from the "Bluebird Café" [a songwriter's showcase club in Nashville, TN]. I've gotten a bit of advice from them on specific things questioned. But, for the most part, I just fly by the seat of my pants. I just think about things and try to figure them out. If I need directions specifically, I would just ask someone who has a little better understanding than I do. As far as the song order, I asked the guy at the studio [to give me some direction] on the options.

Q: Why did you title your CD, *Glass Diary*?

A: *I really felt like I always write really personal things. The reason I titled it Glass Diary is because I felt like that was a fitting title because I had basically written songs out of my life. I wrote like I would write in a diary or journal. [Hence, the title was created].*

Q: Most people guard their diaries and don't want them even exposed to their most intimate friends and family members. They are so careful about who reads their diaries. Yet, yours is open to the public, so to speak. Plus, it's been said, "all writing is autobiography." Certainly, the title of your CD helps portray that sentiment as well. Do you feel exposed with that title?

A: *I think I absolutely feel exposed with not the title but the CD itself, the material that is on it. Every time I stand up to perform in front of people, I have thoughts that go through my head, like "I wonder what they think; I'm telling this part of my life."*

Often times, [as I perform my songs], I kind of have this music video going through my head, these images that conjured up the song. Yes, I absolutely feel exposed. It was the reason I didn't share my music for so long. And, the primary reason that kept me from performing and sharing.

Q: Have you thought about what you would do if you got picked up? Since you do perform and do have a published CD, it's a possibility. What would you do if someone were to offer you a label?

A: *I don't know. I've never done it to be famous. And, I don't think I have the kind of personality that would mesh well with the music industry as it stands today. Now having said that, if there is an opportunity that one of my songs was published, I'd have someone else sing it, provided I felt comfortable with that type of person. Although, this is [not something I could say for certain], unless I were faced with that opportunity. I just don't know what I would do. I certainly would look at all of the options and be smart about the business side of it if this [became a reality].*

[My concern is with how my creativity would be impacted]. Because there's music and then there's the music business. And, it's very much a business. And it is what I think discourages a lot of people. [In this industry, you have] a large group of songwriters and millions of songs and maybe some of them break through and others don't. And, sometimes [a songwriter] will have one hit and [fade] back into the woodwork. And, I think that people in the music industry don't really create music as much as they create an image – a personification of what is selling at that moment.

Q: One of the things that I found so interesting is that most writers have many fears that surface throughout the writing process. And, once the document is complete, the writer sweats out the editor's reading. Then, they are anxious about the public's reaction. But, these writers have anonymity and don't receive direct feedback from the reader. However, you interact with your audience. Describe the anxiety involved and how you deal with this circumstance. You can't hide behind a book cover. You are fully exposed.

A: *You don't always play for audiences where you can tell what they think about your material. And, sometimes people will appear not to be paying attention at all. You just can't seem to get a read on them. Yet, after the gig, they'll come up and buy one of your CDs.*

This is a hard question for me because I had a really bad gig on Friday. The reason it was bad was because it seemed no one was there – only four people. And, it's so hard for me to play to such a small group because I get energy off of the crowd. The more people that are in that room, the better I play. Like everything I do in my life, the more people and pressure the better I perform. That's the way I am built. So, it's challenging to stand up and perform before four people – two of which were my parents.

With anxieties, I guess it just boils down to being comfortable with who I am. I had to learn not to care about whether or not people loved it or hated it. My guitar instructor wisely advised me, "Never base your opinion of your music on what the public says." People will tell you you're a great musician and then you quit practicing [and are no longer as good]. You have to be real. You have to be humble.

But sometimes something really beautiful happens which makes the anxiety worth it.

[When an audience member really connects with your song and seems to match their experience to your words, the experience is divine]. Once, a lady approached me after a gig and said she enjoyed my music. I replied that I felt like I was putting my diary [in front of the world.] She encouraged, "maybe your diary is our diary."

I don't write for people. I write for myself, but it's nice when that connection happens.

I've heard a great quote, "a good piece of writing is never finished; it is only abandoned." I'll listen to my CD and think that I should change something. Because I know the music so well, I can pick out any little detail that is wrong. At some point, you just have to learn to walk away from it. [In addition, I have to get perspective]. Those songs on that album are who I was at that point in my life; which doesn't mean I can't write something completely different for this new album.

Q: An author, Willa Cather, has said, "My art is more important than my friend." She said this in response to the rejection writers sometimes experience when close associates recognize themselves in the story; generally, it's not a favorable depiction. Are there limits to what and who can be incorporated in your work?

A: *To me, it is so blatantly obvious whom I am writing about in a song. However, when I play it for people, it is not always obvious to them.*

There are certain things that are ugly that I haven't been able to write about to the fullest. Does that mean that certain pieces of that experience haven't crept into a song? Absolutely not. I really don't write about other people as much as I do about myself.

There are limitations. There are certain subjects that I consider taboo.

Q: Do you think avoiding the ugliness or taboo hinders your effectiveness as a writer?

A: *No. I believe that certain subjects are not appropriate to bring about into a song. For instance, it is one thing to have references about an abusive relationship. But, to actually [delve] into the physical violence and to be explicit is not necessary.*

That's one of the reason's Hollywood sometimes bothers me. Because they show all of these things that are graphic, the point they are trying to make gets lost.

Wherein, if you use a more subtle approach, people could use their own imaginations and play it out in their minds [to their own level of comfort].

Q: It's refreshing to hear you say that you don't have to be explicit, to go to the deep dark corners of your mind, to be a good writer.

A: *I'm not saying that you don't have to go to those places because you do. And, those places are often where you find your greatest insight about yourself. I truly believe that our trials serve a grand purpose in our lives; they make us who we are. They apply the pressure that is needed to make the diamond, so to speak.*

However, I don't believe in fully taking other people into those places. Although I am very aware people have them, I don't see the point in taking people through them in writing. You can pull from your knowledge base without having to be graphic.

EVOLVING SELF

For Shantell, songwriting is a natural, spiritual, evolving process of self-discovery and sharing. She relates an artistic rendering of herself. She says, "It was called 'Journey of the Soul.' I just remember the colors I chose were in their raw elements; they didn't mix with anything. They were vivid and raw, in their truest form." Her music and lyrics reflect her truest form as well, particularly the "glass diary" she openly shares on her CD.

The following excerpt from her song, "She'll drive on," depicts the grit and growth of art imitating life. Her life.

And the cars roll past

As the street lights stare

Sometimes she meets

Herself out here

She has her next moves on the map

This time she'll choose

No turning back

Soaking up her life like the summer rays

She will drive on. And, she'll continue to write songs that powerfully map every twist and turn, every insight gained.

While the human part of me wanted to submit my interview paper from last year for ease, I'm so glad that you encouraged me to actively participate in this project again. The in-person interview process provides a sense of completeness and connection that the email process can't. The PC can't reveal the human interest and depth that discussion can.

I loved to get inside of another person's head – to ask those questions, which reveal the makeup and mindset of another being. Along with my well-designed questions, new questions came which further inspired, elevated, and taught greatly. She was eloquent; she was honest; she was raw.

Shantell took me on a journey of which I want my reader to fully experience. However, while time and paper size constraints won't allow for me to capture the 1-1/2 hour interview, what is written enlightens.

For me, the most fascinating parts of the interview were discovering Shantell's disinterest in becoming a star. She has the talent and the drive, which have led to a self-published CD and weekly performances. However, her ambition is to feed her soul and not have this hobby become her bread and butter.

Writing Sample: She'll Drive On

V1

The night is falling into this day
The demons call her she'll find a way
To embrace this dark and hold on to this light

The lighting flashes in her mind
Silence fighting with the time
Holding on the faith and letting go

C

And she'll pretend sometimes
Someone holds her
Lifts the weight from her shoulders
And she'll dream until it's dawn
Then she'll drive on

V2

The leaves are falling, the days are clear
Sometimes the voices all disappear
Breathing deep in this world with no regrets

Chorus

Bridge

And the cars roll past
As the street lights stare
Sometimes she meets
Herself out here

V3

She has her next moves on the map
This time she'll choose
No turning back
Soaking up her life like the summer rays

Chorus

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