



The Healing Vibration of Music: An Interview with Artist Woody Simmons

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Abstract

Woody Simmons, best known for her unique banjo style, began her career writing and singing radio commercials in Seattle. She first appeared on Olivia Records playing banjo on Cris Williamson's 1975 album *The Changer and the Changed*, and subsequently toured the West Coast playing guitar, banjo, piano and singing background vocals. Woody's first album, *Oregon Mountains* (Deep River Records) debuted in 1977 and her second album, *Woody Simmons* (Deep River) was released in 1980. In 1988, *FRETS Magazine* named *Oregon Mountains* one of 12 landmark banjo albums of all time "that influenced the evolution of the instrument in other directions." After working as a sound engineer at John Altmann Recording in San Francisco, Woody released two more CDs, *BanjoRama* (2001) and *Mile By Mile* (2008.) Now writing a memoir about her life and career, Woody has emphasized the healing power of music and its impact on the body as well as the spirit. This first excerpt from her book-in progress is one sample of an artist's recollection of biomusicality.

Keywords: Healing vibration; Divine love; Traditional frailing

Opinion

I remember events when I was just three years old. I had vivid dreams that I would grow up to perform at Carnegie Hall. My parents could not understand how I might have heard of Carnegie Hall at age 3, much less profess my future in such a place. They were simple people from a small town in Iowa. I pushed my parents to get me something to play early on; piano lessons, plastic ukulele; anything. They finally gave in when I was 3 and got me the plastic ukulele with a book of chords. My father taught me to play "Ain't She Sweet," and I retired to my bedroom to endlessly practice with the chord book.

The piano lessons came when they could find a teacher that would take a 4 year old student. I pushed them to get me more lessons and more instruments, and they pushed me to practice. To inspire me, my father used to tell me stories of his childhood; when he wasn't practicing the piano enough, his mother would take a ruler and slap his knuckles. The Midwest was brutal and old school.

Songs often came into my head pertaining to current circumstances. My life is one big soundtrack, to be honest. My mentor and friend in the recording business used to drive around with soundtracks playing loudly to enhance his experience of reality; coming around the corner with the strings ever increasing in intensity, crescendo and then a sweet clarinet, softly urging him onward.

My mother wanted me to be famous. She screamed at me to practice. She knew I was a child prodigy, and perhaps had plans I didn't know about for me. But she was the one who wanted to be famous. She was desperate for attention all her life. That was difficult. I actually wanted to be a songwriter and stay out of the limelight, but no one was playing my songs so I started to, and was encouraged by people who came to see me play.

There are those defining moments that can change your life in an instant. I've had a few, as my life goes one way, then another, then another, all seemingly to make sense of being in a physical body, limited by a mind unripe with knowledge. Like pieces of a puzzle, everything seemed to fit together though it wasn't always making sense nor was it always pleasant. I followed my sister to Seattle after I left school. I decided I wanted to be a singer songwriter, and play for a living. I didn't actually make a living. I played at a pool hall/bar for \$10 a night. Maybe a few people heard me. One customer, having had too many drinks, told me I was no Carole King. I did learn to play pool fairly competently and could legally hang out in a bar because I was the entertainment, but the smell of beer and cigarettes never really leaves your select memory, no matter how hard you try; no matter how many fasts, and saunas you take.

It was during this time that the owners of the bar hired me to sing on the radio commercials they had written and it was my first experience in a studio. I was completely hooked. I couldn't decide if I was more intrigued by all the buttons and tape machines and what they could do, or if I liked hearing myself being played back with echo and effects and my beautiful guitar. It was a high time, fun and new and I loved writing new songs and living for the music. It was all I did, all day long. But as things would have it, it was also a time of great sadness, as it was the year Ted Bundy was stalking young women in Seattle. One of the bar owners' sister became a victim of a break-in near the university and beaten until almost dead, a possible victim of Bundy's. It was very sad and I slept little during that time, afraid for my own life as I lived near the University as well. I decided I needed to get out of town and visit friends who were living in San Francisco. It was during this trip that I was raped, brutally raped (but I think that goes without saying), and as this was happening to me, I tried to stay present and accept my death should it occur. I basically died that night. Though I didn't actually die, I didn't know I was still alive. My innocence had been taken. That is to say, all my trust in human beings was taken that night. There were no rape crisis centers at that time; no one to talk to.

That was a defining moment; a memory I can't get rid of. After that event I'm not really sure how I looked on the outside; I was told I was angry and needed to get it out. I kept to myself and played music as if my life depended on it-which it did. This time was the beginning of the women's music network and concerts all over the United States were being organized and produced for women by women. Music was being recorded by women; for women. It was a healing time for a lot of the women involved.

The first time I went to Portland to see Robin Flower and Mary Wings, they took me to their gig at a women's coffee house. Then they played "Oregon Mountains," a song I had written while visiting Mary in Portland. Much to my surprise, when they started singing the chorus, the entire room full of women sang along in a huge chorus with harmony. I was moved to tears. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard.

We formed a band, excited about all this new connection with other lesbians all over the country. Robin, Mary and I called ourselves the "Clinch Mountain Backsteppers" when we heard of a festival in Champaign-Urbana, IL and stressed to the producers that they absolutely needed representation from the Northwest. We were hired. We took a train from Portland to Illinois, and in 3 days aboard the train learned 40 minutes worth of songs to perform at the first National Women's Music Festival. We were delighted to find out we were also written up in the New Yorker magazine in an article on the festival and the rising women's music network. It was by far my best review ever.

Thus began my career in women's music. It was like one big slumber party, touring cross-country in a van, staying on producer's couches or floors, eating at Denny's. It helped to be young. It was unique and I felt honored to be a part of that moment in time. Life has always been like a symphony in my head. There is the dramatic, the comic, rock and roll, romantic. Always going on, always in the moment.

Music can depict any state of mind and influence us, make us cry in a movie theatre, or get up and dance. It is the one thing that has no substance that we can perceive, and when it stops, there is silence, or just the sound of the city. It's not like a painting that you can look at or touch, or any other kind of art. The spoken word can also be read. But music needs to be heard, and then it's gone, into the ether. What is ether anyway? In the dictionary, it's described as "a very rarefied and highly elastic substance formerly believed to permeate all space, including the interstices between the particles of matter, and to be the medium whose vibrations constituted light and other electromagnetic radiation."

It's also described as the substance beyond the moon... Anyway, I can't imagine living without a source to be able to listen to music whenever I want. Before radio and recordings, there was live music only. Myth was passed down from generation to generation, through song and story. My memories of those years of festivals and playing in bars across the country are few, and very select. I remember moments, like singing in a church in Houston when a large praying mantis climbed up the mic stand and onto the microphone while I was singing. I played on.

I wanted more from the women involved with the music. I wanted more love and less ego. I wanted to be accepted for who I was and not judged for wanting less conflict, less drug use, less self-centeredness. I wanted divine love. I was in the wrong business for that, or so I thought. So it was that I stopped touring in 1983 and worked odd jobs.

Almost all of my life I had had these dreams where I could play electric guitar, lead guitar, improvising with total freedom. But when I actually tried I would freeze, and not be able to play fluidly. I had a gig in Oakland one time and was asked to sit in on another artist's set. When I got up to play my electric banjo, I was in that state of total freedom and improvised with ease and when I was driving home afterwards, I was ecstatic; I felt that I had become a real musician. If I never played another note I could retire happy. That was a defining moment. Music should be played with that kind of freedom.

I learned how to frail on a boat in Seattle. Frailing is like claw hammer but maybe a more simplified version. It was really hard. So hard in fact, because I was a guitar player, the awkwardness of trying to coordinate the thumb and the rhythm was impossible. But I was determined and for 10 days I went nowhere, locked in my boat trying for about 10 hours a day. Then, I got it.

All that practicing and learning gave me an appreciation for how much the banjo could sound like a sitar with the drone 5th string. I experimented with different tunings and came up with a tuning with which I wrote Banjo Raga. I was heavily influenced by the use of sitar on 'Revolver'. It was a time when people were experimenting. George Martin, also known as the 5th Beatle, opened up a world of experimentation with the Beatles recordings and influenced all of us.

And so with Banjo Raga, there was this merging of traditional frailing with a raga-like sitar sound and not long after that I also experimented in a c minor tuning that Mary Wings had shown me, writing Suite for Wings. In almost all cultures there is an instrument used for spiritual connection. In India, it is sitar and also tamboura. The sitar has sympathetic strings that resonate with the strings being played. The tamboura has 4 strings usually that are plucked in succession and create a constant resonating sound in 5ths. I believe this sound was created to mimic a sound heard when in deep meditation. It is used to create a meditative space in ashrams in India. It is also used as a background for Indian music and for chanting. I thought that if I could somehow use the 5th string and a tuning that was in 5ths I could create something that would evoke a meditative space. Music takes me to another dimension almost. Like standing next to yourself only aware that you are not separated. So it is that from that place I have written most of my work.

Some songs are for fun; some for love; some to take the listener to an inner place of contemplation. Music is as important to us as anything. We could survive without it, but I personally would hear it whether there was an overt origin or not. All of life is a cacophony of music.

I recently addressed a music class at George Washington University, in Washington, DC. The question was "Where did I get my ideas or influence for my banjo style?" I have talked about this in previous interviews, but have not gone into depth as to my beliefs or experience with vibration and sound. It is my belief that each of us vibrates at a slightly different rate. All things animate and inanimate have a vibrational field or rate. We are all interconnected this way. There literally is no distance between all things in this world as we are all part of this vibrational field. Thus there are humans that vibrate at a slow speed, and some that vibrate at a higher rate. Perhaps when you meet someone and you instantly connect, you may be experiencing his or her similar vibration rate. You may see it as having a tribe in common or background or something else which you find similar. Your tribe is potentially made up of all different types of people all over the planet.

With all of us vibrating at different rates and being of different colors, there is no doubt that the overlap is phenomenal. Meaning, people of varied backgrounds, races, ages can have a similar vibration rate, even women and men. Music vibrates and can influence our mood like nothing else. This vibration will affect different people differently. I may like one type of music that soothes my soul; you may have another type of music in a specific key that takes you to your happy place. On the one hand, men may vibrate at a different rate than women, and have musical likes and dislikes different from women, but this problem of overlap can change the assumed outcome of likes and dislikes.

I do believe vibration is universal, and music gives us access to a deeper place. If you want to try to intellectualize music, there will be many things to consider and quite frankly I don't think anyone has done that completely. There have been a few dabbling in this controversy, but if you want to completely analyze the relationship of music to human beings, I believe you have to experience this vibration on a more spiritual level, not just read about it or do research on it. While I was practicing 10 hours a day to learn how to frail, I noticed how similar the banjo sounded to a sitar when in an open tuning I was

experimenting with. Thus I have continued to compose with this sound as a goal. Banjo Raga was the first piece I composed and then Suite for Wings. Each was a different influence, one Indian and one more Middle Eastern. I also wanted to experience the meditative state the sound took me to. I was in search of this experience for a long time and although composing these pieces on banjo helped, it was years before I actually did experience a deep state of meditation.

In my 20's I was looking for answers and not finding them. I became distraught and depressed until I considered suicide as the only logical solution. I thought about it daily. But I also knew that it was an extreme solution and that it would most likely lead to yet another reincarnation that would be worse than being gay in a straight world. So I kept it to myself and continued to look for the truth.

I held onto music as a way into my inner world. I reached out to the cosmos to intertwine my creativity with my own soul and thus created music as a way to communicate. I didn't say much, and mostly observed life; people, animals. It was my way of learning, taking in my surroundings and analyzing the processes taking place.

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