An interview with Iris DeMent: “The poor are treated like enemies”

Richard Phillips
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Richard Phillips: Who are your main musical influences?

Iris DeMent: I was mainly influenced by the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, and others like Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash. It is difficult to explain what it is about their music that attracts me—it’s how I hear and feel it. There is something about the emotional content of the voices of these singers that attracts me.

RP: In your introduction to the song “Higher Ground,” on *Infamous Angel*, you say that your mother showed you that music is a pathway to a higher ground. Can you explain this? Is this a religious conception?

ID: This is not religious, but what I meant was that my mother used music to relieve her from the problems and difficulties she faced. Music provided an escape for her from all the difficult times our family faced. If there was a family fight or she was upset about some problem, she would sing. It was the way in which she would get herself out of a sad and miserable place.

RP: You were brought up in a religious family. How and why did you leave the church?

ID: I left the church when I was about 16 years old. This was a very difficult thing for me because it had been my whole world. But I had to break away in order to live with myself. There were so many things that I just didn’t agree with. It was hard, but I suppose it would have been harder if I hadn’t, because I would have been living my life dishonestly.

I don’t describe myself as a Christian or religious, but I like to think that how I live my life is honest to myself and other people. It’s hard to explain, but I want my music to somehow show the basic threads of life that bind us all together in some way or another.

RP: You’ve said that you think of music as either being sincere, or insincere. In one interview you said that you “don’t hear much music these days that’s coming from a real place.” Could you elaborate?

ID: What do I mean by that? Well, most of the music you hear on the radio today is developed for making money. It doesn’t feel true or honest and you can feel it in the music. The problem is many people haven’t had the opportunity to hear much honest music.

RP: What pressures are placed on musicians and recording artists to deliver this type of music, and how do you deal with this?

ID: I’ve been lucky with my recording company. I haven’t had this sort of pressure. I talked a lot with them before I signed up and I make the music I want. There hasn’t been any interference; they’ve left me alone artistically.

I think this arrangement is the exception, because I know a lot of other musicians and there is an awful lot of pressure placed on them. There is a lot of grooming and shaping of images that goes on and the results musically are never good.

RP: How do you approach song writing?

ID: When I’m asked about writing I always start thinking about pencils and pieces of paper, but I don’t approach it that way. A lot of living experience has to happen before I can write a song. I tend to go through a process of struggling with my own life and then, after a while, the songs come to me pretty quickly.

My first impulse is to deal with some problem that I might have, so my first aim is to get through to myself. Secondly, I hope that what I have created will make somebody else think more deeply and then get them out of a jam.

As you know, creating is not always easy. There’s lots of agony that goes into it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining, because this is how it has been since time began. If you want to make something really

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worthwhile and true, then you have to suffer for it.

RP: You write about the difficulties that confront ordinary working people. Can you explain why you take up these themes and what you aim to do?

ID: When I began I didn't sit down and think that I was going to write about these subjects. My songs are an outgrowth of my life, of where I come from, and how my parents and my family lived and my own experiences. I heard many stories about hard times and these were part of my life.

But now I'm starting to realize that I am going to have to do more of this. The more I hear and learn about the world and all the injustice that goes on—the poverty, the terrible things that happen-it makes me realize that maybe I should begin writing more and more about these subjects. This has got to be done so that more people understand what we are really facing.

The poor are treated like enemies and it's getting now that you are almost considered a nut case if you speak out for ordinary people. This is something that I worry about a lot.

RP: Could you explain the hard times your family encountered?

ID: My parents had a small farm, they grew corn and other things, and the family used to do hours of cotton picking to supplement our income. In the early 60s when the farm fell on hard times and we had to sell it, my father went to work in a factory in town. It was called Emerson Electric.

They had him working eight-hour shifts and then they would demand that he work another eight hours. He was forced to work the swing shift, the graveyard shift, all sort of times. These hours were killing him and becoming impossible for him and the family. This went on for a while and so he and some other guys decided to try and do something about it. It wasn't that they wanted increased money. All they were after was better conditions, and so they tried to get a union there. They set up a picket line. This lasted a year but they weren't successful. It was after this that we went out to California.

RP: Do you sense that more songwriters and artists are starting to speak out. Do you see a change?

ID: Yes, I think that maybe there is a change taking place. There are more musicians and other people emerging, like there used to be, who are deciding that they can't keep silent about these questions. Steve Earle is dealing with some of these questions, and Bruce Springsteen, on his last album, takes up these issues. This is encouraging because the newspapers aren't doing anything to help people.

RP: In 1996 some music critics in the US disparaged your song *Wasteland of the Free* for its comments on the government, the church and other political questions.

ID: Yes, there was that kind of thing, but the positive responses I've received outweigh the negative ones. I must admit I didn't expect that. I thought that maybe people would be put off, but everyone finds something in the song that they have to agree with.

This song was written from the guts and because it's such an in-your-face type of song, I sometimes find it difficult to perform. But I can't keep quiet about these things. I have to live with myself and want to be completely honest with everybody.

I don't have all the answers, but if my songs make people think more deeply and figure out solutions that I'm not able to, then this is what it's for. If people get upset and it forces them to stop and think, then the song has done the job.

RP: What advice would you give young people today?

ID: The first thing I'd say is turn off the TV and start digging around for information that's not from a corporation trying to make money. It has dawned on me over the last few years that these news networks and corporations are not interested in the truth. They're just in it for the money.

I don't want to go on, I could do that for a long time and then it would sound like preaching, but young people should look at things a lot more critically and try and get some solid, unbiased information. If you can get the truth, then you can make some informed decisions.

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