



**Age of
Artists**

Interview

Carol Vanwelden

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The interview was conducted by Hendrik Achenbach on December 8, 2014 via video conference.

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Interview

Age of Artists: Caroll, I understand that you started to learn the piano at the age of seven and completed your training as a musician in 1998 at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. However, before that, you earned a diploma in commercial engineering in Brussels. So what made you become an artist? You could have decided to go for a "normal" job with your first diploma.

Caroll Vanwelden: My parents always told me, well, if you want to go into music you must prove us that you can get a good diploma. I do not agree that one is a good direction and the other is not. Music for me is as important as somebody else's normal job. But I wasn't really annoyed by that either. I thought, okay, if my parents want me to do this engineering stuff then I am free and I can do my own thing afterwards. But from a very young age, I was creating my own music. I was moving around with a recorder the whole day and very passionate about recording, too.

Age of Artists: At some point, you actually wrote a thesis on, quote: "Artistic freedom or financial waste within the performing arts". That's quite a title. When was that actually, in your career? Was it after the engineering studies?

Caroll Vanwelden: No, in Belgium, when you study engineering, in your fifth year you have to write a paper. About any subject, and as I was always very attracted by music and the artistic sector, but studied in a very mathematical and economical direction, I thought: I am going to mix both - the economical part and the artistic part.

Age of Artists: If you look at your work as an artist, is there a philosophy behind it that you can summarize for us?

Caroll Vanwelden: I always work in a very intuitive way, so when I like something, I just do it. And for me, there is a very high standard. I always wanted to be perfect. I mean, I don't want to do something quickly, badly. I always try to finish my projects in a very fine way. That's my philosophy. But on the other hand, my creative work starts in a very intuitive way. Like with my Shakespeare project. I went through my book of sonnets, and when there was a word or a beginning of a text that really inspired me, it started, and there would be a melody coming. When it didn't inspire me, well, then I didn't search for something. Then I would just go to another song. It didn't matter.

Age of Artists: When it comes to lyrics, I always find it very important that the way the text is distributed over the musical notes results in a natural sound. That you don't pronounce a word that you sing differently from how you would pronounce it when speaking - putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable, for example.

Caroll Vanwelden: Yes. That's very difficult with Shakespeare.

Age of Artists: I could not begin to imagine how you would come up with sixteen totally different songs and melodies if all of the texts have the same metre, the same structure, and the same length.

Caroll Vanwelden: And the same accents, too. Every time the second word has an accent. "When I do count the clock that tells the time." It's a lot of work, but I always stick to his pattern. I mean, you can listen to all the songs on both CDs. There is no sonnet where I do not really stick to this accent thing. Because I think my musical accent has to fit with his iambic pentameter accent. So I wanted it to really fit together and it's sometimes very difficult to stick to his accents but I change my melody if it does not fit.

Age of Artists: Let's talk about your audience. Do you think of your audience when you record the songs of a CD? Or would that rather be in a live show?

Caroll Vanwelden: When I'm making and recording a new album, I don't think of a specific audience. For this project, I had the goal of bringing the sonnets to everybody. A lot of people think that the sonnets are very difficult, which they are in fact. But in a certain way, when you listen to the music, you can find a way through a sonnet, you can find and feel the emotion in the music. I wanted people to close their eyes, and, even if they don't understand a word of the sonnet, feel what Shakespeare wanted to say in his sonnet.

Age of Artists: Let's talk about arrangements for a moment, because you did not only write the melodies, you also created the arrangements for singer, piano, trumpet, drums, and bass.

Caroll Vanwelden: Well, at the beginning, I do not arrange it in this way. I think a good song must stand on its own with a bass line and a melody. That's my basic principle. When you have a bass, and you

have the melody, the song must sound good and be able to stand on its own. All the decoration afterwards, the arrangement and everything else, it's something that I do in a different stage. The most important thing is the first time that the musicians in my band hear the music. Because then I have the feedback of somebody very neutral and very objective. And that's very important.

Age of Artists: Does it sometimes happen that there are totally opposing approaches to playing the arrangement or that people have totally different opinions and you as the boss have to make a decision?

Caroll Vanwelden: There are always situations, but most of the time we work in a very constructive way. We don't really confront each other with "that's my idea!" or "that's better!" - no, it's like we try to find something that makes everybody happy. And at the end I am always saying, this is okay or this is not okay, of course, because it's my music. They know when I don't like it, I don't have to say it. I don't feel like a boss and I don't have to tell them how to play. They know their instruments better than I do.

Age of Artists: Everything we talked about so far focused a lot on your Shakespeare projects. Is there a difference if we talk about projects like the "Don't Explain" album where you have the jazz standards that you "just" need to play and sing?

Caroll Vanwelden; Yes, with "Don't Explain", the process is totally different because we're playing standards so everybody knows the songs. We just come together, the four of us and can start playing. We had a lot of rehearsals and made the arrangements, the four of us, together.

Age of Artists: You never had to make decisions about how you wanted these arrangements to come across and sound like?

Caroll Vanwelden: Well, of course, because I decided how we're going to do it, at the end. I did the album art work, the producing work, and the mixing work.

Age of Artists: Coming back to the Shakespeare project: if I am not mistaken, you created the sixteen melodies for the first Shakespeare album in just two weeks.

Caroll Vanwelden: Actually, it was even less. I think I created them in about four or five days. But the thing is, it's like a creative process, when you start to find melodies on text it's just the basic melody. The development of the songs, such as bass lines and arrangements of course take much more time.

Age of Artists: When you're composing, do you work long hours, or do you take lots of breaks?

Caroll Vanwelden: I don't have loads of hours, because I have to do so many things. But when I'm in a very creative mood, in one hour I can write loads of things. It's like it keeps coming, coming, coming, and then it just stops. Sometimes I work 3 days in a row and I have nothing useful, and sometimes I can have lots of good ideas in only a few hours' time, it's always very different.

Age of Artists: Age of Artists is all about finding out how artists work. Not only musicians. We talk to artists from all fields, find out how they work, and from our conversations extract certain patterns, certain approaches to getting work done that will help people in professional organizations, in companies, people with what we called a "normal" job when we began this conversation. Do you think that people in "normal" organizations can actually learn from the way you or other artists that you know work and approach their creative processes?

Caroll Vanwelden: Sometimes it's very similar. I mean, like the networking, to make a career in big firms, which is politics,

basically, and diplomacy and everything around it. In the music business, you have that too. One of the things that is not similar at all I think is that when I work with my group, I work with very strong individuals. Very good musicians are very, very sensitive and very fragile. If you are a musician, music is part of what you are. As a singer, your voice is your person. As an instrumentalist, if you play the double bass, it's like your body. So if you criticize somebody about their sound or way of playing it's very personal. And that makes it very difficult sometimes to manage musicians.

Age of Artists: Any other points you can think of?

Caroll Vanwelden: Yes, another point that's very similar in music and in business is that it's a man's world. I think the women still have to prove themselves more and certainly as an instrumentalist, I think. Of course you have loads of female singers, but it's different. I mean, I speak about musicians, instrumentalists, singer songwriters. It's still quite a men's world. It's really changing, of course, but I think that's a similarity in both worlds.

Age of Artists: When you think about the notion of "teamwork", do you think there is something that the businesses could learn from the musicians?

Caroll Vanwelden: I don't know. I think musicians, they do not always work very well as a team. I'm not speaking about my group, actually, because we work very well as a team. And with the other project, we also worked very well as a team. But I think, sometimes people are incompatible with each other. If you put five very, very good musicians, professionals, together, sometimes it just doesn't fit. I think teamwork is easier in business. But I would never fit in the normal world.

Age of Artists: But you were there, at one point. You started your first career at a company.

Carroll Vanwelden: Yes it's true, I worked for a company too. I told you at the beginning I was a perfectionist and when I do things, I want them to be very well done, otherwise I don't do them. And that's the thing, when you work in very big firms, you don't have everything under control, because you need to delegate.

Age of Artists: In your work, what do you do when you realize a certain team just doesn't work? Do you break it up and find somebody else?

Carroll Vanwelden: It depends. Sometimes, they put teams together, when you have a project. The band is there and you are not like a deciding element. The band is one band, I mean, there are lots of projects like that where you don't have a choice, and I think that's good. That's okay for me. I'm not very difficult. I make it work. You have to make the best of it then.

Age of Artists: If we think about the notion of "improvisation", does it play a huge role in either your own music as a singer, as a piano player, or in the way other musicians in your band play?

Carroll Vanwelden: With Shakespeare it's more difficult than with normal standards because Shakespeare has a structure, so we cannot repeat only one piece of text at the end or we cannot break up the whole thing all the time. But we try to keep it open to improvise. After a while we know the pieces and we know that we can put something here and something there. I like the evolution of a piece. It starts with something very small and then you can create more and more and more.