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When Bob Neuwirth Talks, Artists Listen

Denise Sullivan published on June 16, 2011

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When it comes to speaking on the record, Bob Neuwirth is generally a man of few words. “I think it was Matisse who said artists should have their tongues cut out,” he says. And yet, Neuwirth’s visual and audio past and the unique role he’s played in the lives of his fellow artists, as a catalyst to epic songs and moments, is part of the secret history of rock ‘n’ roll. Upon the occasion of the first [retrospective of his paintings](#), Neuwirth, who’s solo singer-songwriter albums *Back to the Front* and *99 Monkeys* are admired by connoisseurs of the form, is also a great teller of tales (rather than a tale-teller), and he’s been talking a bit. As someone who’s had the ear of his fellow artists for five decades now, I seized the time to ask his critical take on 21st Century art and music.

“Art is everywhere,” he says, though to recognize it, “It takes a different set of eyes. If it’s music, it’s a different set of ears...Just because something is reproduced in multiples doesn’t make it good,” he says. “Turn on the radio. What you hear on the radio is for people who aren’t really listening,” he says.

If some of what Neuwirth is rapping sounds as cryptic as a zen koan, it’s because he’s earned the right to wax on; he’s pulled-off the great American hat trick of living an artist’s life while remaining just under the radar of massive success. An original hipster—back when it was still cool to be cool—his tales of beatnik glory took him from Boston’s Back Bay, hanging out with folk guitarist Sandy Bull, to checking into art school (“but not for long,” as he sings in his semi-autobiographical song, “Akron,” the rubber city from which he ran away). From Boston it was on to busking in Paris with Ramblin’ Jack Elliott; he spent time developing his abstract-expressionist painting in Berkeley, while winging it as a folksinger who “couldn’t sing and couldn’t play,” he says. He was insulted by Lenny Bruce, kissed on the mouth by Miles Davis, and invited to meet the Beatles while on tour with Bob Dylan in England, a trip he took in exchange for art supplies. “He said I’ll give you a leather jacket and all the canvas you can paint on,” remembers Neuwirth of the deal. The resulting tour was documented in D.A. Pennebaker’s milestone rock docs, *Don’t Look Back* and the follow-up, *Eat the Document*, which Neuwirth also had a hand in technically assisting. He remained a confidante of Dylan’s (he was there when they switched on the electricity at Newport and got on board the [Rolling Thunder Revue](#)). A compadre to Kris Kristofferson and a friend to Janis Joplin (he co-wrote “Mercedes Benz”), from there it was on to the pre-punk New York and Max’s Kansas City scene, legendary hanging place for visual artists; Neuwirth brought in songwriters like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, and contributed to the making of the music there as well as gathered more fuel for some of his great untold stories of rock’n’roll. “Then the New York Dolls showed up, and that was pretty much it,” he says, but not before he advised Patti Smith, one of the club’s regulars, to turn those poems of hers into some songs. Neuwirth went on to collaborate with John Cale on *The Last Day on Earth*, a musical theater piece concerning the apocalypse, and worked on projects that took him from Cuba (*Havana Midnight*) to Appalachia (*Down From the Mountain*), putting him in the orbit of collaboration with musicians and artists of all stripes.

There are plenty more stories where these came from; between the brushes with greatness, Neuwirth was attempting to collage and paint his own masterpiece at the end of an era. Bumping around from studio to studio, he once lived in a rat-infested loft formerly occupied by jazzman Eric Dolphy. But New York and the art scene was changing: The roads for struggling artists to take gradually began to close down; the art and music inspired by the ideas that emerged in the ‘60s and ‘70s were subsumed into a new age of mass consumerism. I asked Neuwirth if he could ever imagine the culture returning to a time when artists and musicians held as much influence as 15 minutes of fame does today.

“In the 21st Century, everyone thinks they’re an artist,” he says, “But trying to do *anything* good is harder than it looks. There’s lots of good around but that doesn’t make it excellent and it doesn’t make it art. Someone actually just said to me that they thought banking was an art,” he says.

As his painting retrospective at gallery nestled away in Santa Monica drew to a close last week, Neuwirth waxed philosophical about art’s place in the culture today. “If people want art, they have to look for art,” he says, noting there’s no shortage of work. “There are plenty of musicians with things to say. There’s plenty of jazz...classical...there’s really good paintings around—maybe not for sale. Just because something is available in multiples, doesn’t mean it’s good,” he says. And while he acknowledges one person’s cup of meat might not be another’s— “There’s something to be said for beauty being in the eye of the beholder,” he says—he can’t help but add-on with an aphorism that’s inarguable: “Bad art is better than good bombs.”



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