

An Interview with Earth Mama (Joyce Johnson Rouse)

What made you decide to become a performer and songwriter?

I've been creating original music since as far back as I can remember — long before I knew what a songwriter or composer did. I feel it was not so much a decision but an acquiescence to my true nature. I had tried doing a number of other things, but realized that I cannot NOT write songs, and that a part of my most authentic self loves theatrics, drama and making people laugh!



I guess you can say that songwriting and performing are as embedded in my skin as my sweat glands (how un-*gland*-morous!).

How is it you became committed to inspiring others to care for the Earth?

I have been inspired by incredible teachers — some I knew personally, and some who inspired me from the stories of their actions that made some little part of the world a better place to live for someone. This is how I wrote “Standing on the Shoulders” (from the CD *Love Large*). The first time I heard those words in a significant way was at an awards dinner for women receiving recognition for their roles in improving the lives of local women. I jotted it down as a possible title and set it on my piano, where it whispered to me for weeks to begin a song.

When I finally started writing the song, I had in mind environmental heroes like John Muir, Rachel Carson, George Washington Carver, Johnny Appleseed, and suffragist and feminist heroines like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Carrie Chapman Catt. “Standing On The Shoulders” is a reminder that we owe a debt of gratitude to not only our teachers, but also our teachers’ teachers.

That song has been very successful for you, hasn't it?

“Standing On The Shoulders” was chosen to be the theme song for the celebration of the 75th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage in Washington, D.C. I am very honored and blessed that so many organizations have requested musical licenses to use “Standing On The Shoulders” in honoring their leaders, graduates, retirees and the like. We have gotten so many requests to use “Standing On The Shoulders” for events, commissionings, retirements, graduations, etc., that we've made sheet music available in two different arrangements to meet their diverse needs. It is the fulfillment of a dream that my songs are being used to move and inspire people to greater heights of service, and lead more people to care for our Earth.

It sounds like you have a personal connection to that phrase, “Standing On The Shoulders”...

My mother had an amazing amount of personal faith. I am blessed that I received that legacy from her. She was a tireless worker at the church in which I was raised. Whenever I was feeling sorry for myself she would remind me that the best antidote for self-pity was to do something helpful for someone who had worse circumstances. And she set the bar high as an example. I believe that we heal the broken places in our own lives when we help others. With balance and compassion, by helping others, we help ourselves, too. I am standing on *her* shoulders and the shoulders of many other great women.

What led to your combining your musical talents and passion for the environment?

When I moved to Nashville in 1986 to pursue professional songwriting, I was somewhat dissatisfied. I loved writing music and hearing amazing musicians bring it to life, but something was missing from the experience.

Again, it was not so much a decision, as my soul telling me that this gift of music — and the years I had spent honing the crafts of songwriting and wordsmithing — were intended to be used for something bigger than “OOO, I need you baby” or “You broke my heart” songs.

I've been an advocate for many progressive environmental stands and issues since my youth. I was spending a great deal of time on eco-activism and on music, but never realized that combining them might be possible. Prayer, meditation and long, honest conversations with myself led me down this path.

Your slogan is Helping Heal The Planet One Song At A Time. Do you really believe songs can heal the planet?

My belief is that God can heal anything. We live in a world very much in need of healing — people, families, habitats, faith communities, eco-systems, nations, the ozone layer... the list goes on. Over the years, people have been moved to greater faith by music. People have used music to march into battle, to strive for equality, to be paid fair wages for their work — all kinds of music from classical to folk. I believe that songs can be powerful tools to nurture and encourage both action and a depth of understanding about important ideas. *Every great social movement has marched to the strains of its own music.* So yes, I believe that music is one possible vehicle for healing.

Science and medical studies have documented the power of learning via the affective domain of the brain, where new concepts and ideas are learned and remembered more deeply through the senses and emotion. There is a reason that most of us learned our ABCs by singing them — because they are more quickly and deeply learned with music! Music Therapy and its practitioners facilitate healing every day through music and song.

And you believe that, through your songs, you can teach people about important environmental concepts?

Our generation suffers from information overload. Because our brains are so full of technical knowledge and trivia, we have lost a great deal of practical Earth-basic knowledge, or Earth Literacy. Songs are melodies with a message attached — and they have a way of getting inside of you and *sticking*. Only by relearning and respecting the critical basics of living in harmony with nature can we hope to continue the human race and live sustainably on the planet.

Songs such as “Only Take What You Need,” “Tree Polka,” “Less is More,” “Travel Light” and “For Alex” are my way of sharing a bit of Earth Literacy with the world. I have been amazed by adults who have asked about very basic concepts of ecology after hearing some of the songs. I am delighted that people feel free to ASK and then share that information with others.

Most of your music sounds light-hearted and fun, but even though I might be tapping my foot and singing along, the words have a depth not found in most pop music...

My songs carry a message and provoke a call to action. For too long, our society has ignored the problems in the environment which we have created. We've swept them under the rug. By singing about these issues, I'm removing the rug and letting people see what's there. For example, the song “Away” (from the CD *Grass Roots*;) makes the point that you can't really throw anything “away”. Those styrofoam peanuts and that nuclear waste will be there for thousands of years. That song was my translation of the First Law of Conservation of Energy and Matter into music. The final songform is a round — appropriately enough!

Thomas Berry, writer, prophet and geologist, writes that we are certainly at the end of the Cenozoic era and we stand at a divide in the continuum of history. Our actions will determine whether we enter the Ecozoic era, in which we learn to live in harmony with the Earth, or the Technozoic era, in which we will depend on

technology to solve all of our problems — with a dwindling supply of resources. He refers to our task as *The Great Work*. We all have a role to play in *The Great Work*— mine is to compose and sing, and REMIND people of our connection to the Earth! And I hope that many will join in the singing.

Why do you want people to sing along at your shows and with your recordings?

Singing is a very powerful tool for making a connection between people — and for connecting with something deeper inside ourselves. That's why almost every church, faith community, and religion makes use of singing. Pete Seeger says that we strengthen the bonds of community when we sing together.

Native cultures from all continents know of the power of singing to call up our higher selves and the Higher Power of the Universe, or for many, God. We also know that music can have a healing effect on human beings. As my friend Al McCree says, "We don't sing because we're happy. We're happy because we sing!" I have suffered on and off from depression much of my life. Music has been an important part of my treatment and recovery, and I think it can be for many other people, too.

Who is your music aimed at? What ages or demographic? Are your speaking presentations aimed at the same audience?

Anyone still breathing can enjoy Earth Mama music and key-note addresses. I get fan mail from mothers of small children and from elders of diverse communities telling me how my songs have resonated with them.

My "Music and Conversations" concerts and addresses are individually shaped for each specific audience that hires me — preschool age, seniors, and everything in between. The older folks get a big kick out of some of the antics and silly props that I originally put in for families and children!

I think some of my music helps people connect with their inner child or hidden "fun" self. Studies of the brain and learning processes have clearly shown that people learn best when the learning is connected to emotions or senses, especially with humor and fun.

Unlike most recording artists, your music spans a diverse variety of styles and genres. Why is this? Is it a conscious decision?

I grew up with a mother who loved pop, Broadway, easy listening and standards — a dad who loved country and polka music — older siblings who played The Platters, Blood, Sweat And Tears and The Beatles over and over. I started doing musical theatre when I was in 6th or 7th grade. From that I learned to love and respect solid well-crafted melodies and articulate, wordsmithed lyrics. I also had exposure to a vast repertoire of choral and band music because of the incredible Iowa public school system and their support for arts education. (I'd like to thank my great teachers — Louise Precious, Margaret Smeby, and Margaret Lease.) All of those musical influences can be found somewhere in my music.

But those are only influences. I came out of the womb making music and know that it does not come from me — I'm just an instrument through which it plays! The Creative Spirit moves me to draw from everything I hear and see, using African rhythms and chants in "We Are One," a French cabaret style in "Trees," Spanish flamenco for "Energy," and dixieland in "Only Take What You Need." From jazz I incorporated a bit of scat-singing in "The Bird Song." I visited the traditional blues style in "Green Blues" and even calypso in "Less Is More."

I had so many songs with different styles from around the world that we decided to release a CD called *Around The World With Earth Mama!*

You've been traveling and performing for ten years. Do you have any colorful stories from the road you'd like to share?

In nearly every show I do, I sing and perform "The Energy Tango" (listed as "Energy" on the *Around The World* CD). I always invite volunteer flamenco dancers up on to the stage — and the results are totally unpredictable! I dress them with a colorful assortment of feather boas, the music starts, and the fun begins...! Some volunteers have become so involved that they take over the stage. I've had to stop the music and say, "Waitaminnut—! Get your own show!" In Georgia recently, one of my volunteers was the principal of the school at which I was performing. The costume transformed him into a Latin Fred Astaire! And he surprised me at the finish of the song by swooping me into a backbending dip! The audience went wild!

When an adult audience and I sing "The Tree Polka," particularly in the Mid-West and Northern U.S., couples will often jump up and dance along, allowing me to shine the spotlight on the polka dancers. We have a lot of fun in my shows! Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme wrote that "Self-expression is the original sacrament of the universe." It is a holy thing when we sing and play and dance in honor of creation.

Do you have any funny or entertaining stories from the studio?

Most of the musicians I work with have wonderful and bizarre senses of humor, so there is plenty of cutting up between periods of serious playing. I especially love the goofy word-play humor. Sometime the puns go on way longer than you want when you are paying by the clock! But, humor is a great tool that many musicians use to stay relaxed.

I've had a few agonizing moments in the studio when a great take or a whole section of music was eaten by a computer glitch or a tape machine! But the studio is where the magic happens for me — where all the sounds and instruments I've been hearing in my head actually become real — and usually it's better than I ever imagined!

Can you tell us a little about the current CD you are working on?

My current album focuses on our "place" on this rock and in the Universe, and it's titled *Under The Rainbow*. The classic song "Over the Rainbow" is such a distinct and important song, and it was on my mind one day as our government began to drop bombs in another part of the world. It occurred to me that we all live HERE — *under* the rainbow — and we need to learn to get along with each other. So that inspired me to write a song called "Under The Rainbow." Several of the songs on this new CD are already being used by projects and groups to share the concept of sustainability.

What other songs are on your new CD?

There is a song called "Fireball" inspired by a Rhode Island Sister of Mercy who teaches her preschool and primary students about our glorious beginnings by telling them "You come from a fireball!" (Thank you Mary Pendergast.) As soon as I saw some of the amazing photos from the Hubble Telescope from deep space, I was charged with the power of our cosmic history. It was a thundering riot to write — hammering away at the bass keys on the piano, trying to simulate the drum sounds I was hearing in my head!

This year is the 10th anniversary of the first recording of Earth Mama music, so I also re-recording one of my first songs, "Earth Mama," in a bold new way — kind of Earth Mama *all grown up!* And the new CD will also feature a song I wrote with school children in Hawaii.

How did you come to write a song with children in Hawaii?

I've been privileged to visit and work as artist-in-residence with the PRISM students from Kualapuu School twice on their beautiful island of Molokai. Together we wrote a song about the unique ecology of their

island, "Wind, Wing and Wave." We wanted to help people understand the importance of preserving the ecological integrity of each unique ecosystem on Earth. The native species of the Hawaiian Islands have been particularly devastated by exotic and invasive non-native species.

The Hawaiian people are extremely musical, and the children from this school and the PRISM program sing like angels. I am honored to share a bit of this warm and gentle culture with my listeners. I offer this song in solidarity with the efforts of the Molokai people to preserve their island, their history, and their traditions.

Sounds like you put a lot of thought into your music!

Yes! The new CD also has a strong thread of justice and peace running throughout. Some recent experiences have taught me that there is no peace without justice. The First Law of Ecology is "It's all connected." I cannot be *only* working on air quality issues in Ohio, without considering the issue of water quality in China or the workplace health at the Maquiladoras in Mexico. It only takes a couple of steps examining nature's cycles and systems to make that connection. And we cannot scratch the surface of environmental destruction in this country without exposing massive examples of environmental racism and the need for eco-justice. It all stems from the same source. And there is really only one remedy — The Golden Rule: *Do unto others...*

What other musical projects are you working on right now?

Right now I'm also working on some other exciting recording projects, including *Rants and Chants for Activists...* also, a recording for young children... and a CD of meditation music... and a musical project focused on Healing — Mental, Physical and, uhh... Earth-ical! And I continue to work on my musical (theatrical) play — *Earth Mama*.

What else is Earth Mama up to this year?

We're launching a new web-site this year with new opportunities for activism, education and purchasing eco-friendly products. I'm having the busiest spring concert schedule I've ever had — and I've received invitations for European concerts in 2005 in connection with Earth Charter education! Isn't that wonderful? One of my songs is being featured in UNESCO's new *Songs For Peace* songbook. And I enthusiastically continue in my work for Musicians United to Sustain the Environment, founded by eco-icon Walkin' Jim Stoltz.

Are you working with the Earth Charter? Can you tell us a little about it?

I have become an unofficial cheerleader for the Earth Charter. If you are not familiar with it, finish reading this, then go directly to www.earthcharterusa.org. Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200! Read it, absorb it and spread the word to others. Many of my songs from various CDs are being used in various projects globally to teach the concepts of the Earth Charter. Some of my songs, "We Are One" and the "Earth Pledge," for example, have been translated into other languages. Now we can all sing along in French and Spanish!

What are some of your current challenges?

I'm very challenged by creating a successful viable model for sustainable business. This is a huge struggle for me. I am primarily a right-brained, circular/spiral thinker. Most business information, models and systems are geared to communicate with leftbrained, logical, linear thinkers.

Another major challenge is *funding* all these creative projects, so please purchase — do not copy — my CDs. And tell your friends about me, and mention me to any organizations and businesses that you feel would benefit from an Earth Mama show! You can be a part of our team by spreading the word, and consider yourself a Voluntary Vice-President of Marketing! I could not do this work without the support of so many people who buy multiple copies — even boxes — of CDs for gift-giving.

And like everyone else, I am continually challenged to live more simply, and with greater ecological integrity, as I wrote and sang about in my song “Stuff” (from the CD *Around The World*). I have to remind myself that no one is doing this perfectly. No one in our culture is living the perfect ecologically sustainable life. But we can all do a little better each day to make this planet a healthier, safer place. Recycling everything you can is a great place to start.

Just how bad off is the environment? There are still many who refuse to admit there is a serious problem. As the preamble to the Earth Charter states, “We stand at a critical place in Earth’s history.” The desperate, critical state of our planet beckons us to make changes in our lifestyles and in how our civilization operates. I believe we have a moral and ethical obligation to leave a sustainable future for our children’s children, and beyond.

In the central U.S., we are now seeing vast areas of dead soil where no earthworms live. There is a huge dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, in which no aquatic life can survive. Sixteen percent of the former Soviet Union is considered unsafe for habitation due to permanent toxic pollution of the air, water and soil. We are still witnessing high numbers of birth defects of Vietnamese children from residual pollution from the Vietnam War.

Even in the last decade, our use of “depleted” uranium weapons in the Balkans and in the Middle East has continued. Depleted uranium weapons are still very radioactive and are one possible source of Gulf War Syndrome. Our own health is truly interconnected and equal to the health of the planet. Our lifestyles, our growing population, our demand for luxury and outrageous amounts of stuff, our wasteful energy system and race to use up fossil fuels — these are all contributing to the killing of the living systems that support us and all life on this planet.

Aren’t more people aware than ever before?

Many people have a growing awareness but a sense of helplessness because the problem seems so big. Individuals truly can make a difference. Through our actions we can develop a new *Earthic* — an ethic for the Earth — to overcome these problems. It is heartening and empowering for me to be able to work with organizations committed to Earth restoration. I see these springing up in almost every major faith community and in secular grass roots community organizations. There is powerful change happening and I feel blessed to be a tiny part of it.

Do you have any closing message?

The state of the world, the environment, and our civilization is such that we have reached a point at which a business must be good for the Earth, and fair and just for all human beings, or it cannot be a good business — no matter what the financial profits are.

Recently, I was at a large business-networking event and mentioned what my company did: *Helping Heal the Planet One Song at a Time*. One traditionally-suited businessman asked, “You can make a living doing that?” I had to answer his question with one of my own: “Do you think Johnny Appleseed ever came in from planting thousands of apple trees across hundreds of miles and decided to build wagons instead because his Q2 bottom line wasn’t satisfactory?”

If he asked me that same question today, I might answer, “I don’t know, but I am trying to help make life possible for your grandchildren and all other living things.”