

Screen Door

THE POWER TO CHANGE

BY ANA EGGE

After Trump was elected, a swastika appeared in the sidewalk, drawn into wet cement near my Brooklyn apartment. I spent months walking past it, shocked it was still there and thinking, “Someone needs to do something.” Finally I realized, I could be that someone. I asked a neighbor to help me cover it with more wet cement.

Fast forward to 2021. I was on my way to the studio when I saw a slogan painted on a fence, one of the far right’s antisemitic rallying cries. This time, no more months of walking by. I took a picture and reported it and then I posted about it online.

I felt compelled to act because of the question I explore every day in my work as an artist: What would it be like to live in a society where everyone really felt welcome? Like they really belonged. No matter their skin color, sexual identity, or religion.

This is a question not just for me as the mother of a 7-year-old daughter. Not just a question for my neighborhood. It’s a question for my industry, and especially for my genre of Americana music.

Growing up poor and white and gay, I’ve always felt connected to folks on the fringes. Going to see live music gave me a sense of belonging. It’s something I’ve wanted to create at my own shows.

How do I do that? How do we as musicians make everyone who attends our shows feel comfortable and welcome?

For me, it means wrestling with my own lineage and refusing to demonize others, even those whose views I find offensive.

*Not who I was, but how we were
Living on the fringes
strugglin’ and poor
But I was proud ‘cause I was taught
That we were good and they were not.*

Those lines are from “Lie Lie Lie,” a song I wrote about my father, who freely shares his sexist, racist, and antisemitic beliefs. Though I never agreed with him,



I realize lately how I’ve unconsciously absorbed some of that belief system.

I always thought I was open-minded and pretty aware. But after George Floyd was murdered and I watched police bash protesters in the street and kill Black people with impunity, I realized I didn’t know much. Watching white supremacists resurface en masse in Charlottesville, I realized I had much to learn about the history of racism, antisemitism, and the structure of power in this country — and the history of resistance to oppression, too.

Fortunately, a few years back, I met a man after one of my shows in New York City. We got to talking about country music at the bar and hit it off. That man was Eric Ward, executive director of Western States Center. Based in Portland, Oregon, the organization has spent three decades organizing resistance to bigotry and authoritarianism.

When Eric invited me to be part of the inaugural group of 15 Americana songwriters in Western States Center’s Inclusive Democracy Culture Lab: An Artist Cohort for Countering Bigotry, I was excited. But I had no idea what to expect. I’d crossed paths with some of the other participants on tour and I knew a few by name, but many were strangers to me. What was a “culture lab”? What did “inclusive democracy” even mean?

The life of a touring musician can get pretty lonely, even inside the bubble of your band and crew. In a year that was so politically polarizing and so isolating because of the pandemic, the Inclusive Democracy Culture Lab enabled us to connect as artists, as well as learn more about ourselves and the anti-bigotry work we all need to be doing.

It opened my eyes to see how segregated my corner of the music scene is. It didn’t take long to see that in my career, all roads lead back to my choices. I’m the one with the power to hire those who’ve been traditionally excluded. So for my new record, *Between Us*, the majority of folks joining me in the studio were people of color, queer, and/or women.

Through the Culture Lab, I’ve learned more ways to include people who might not feel welcome, and to engage those whom I might judge on the surface for having different beliefs than my own.

The venue for this work is anyplace I happen to be. In all of my interactions with people, in person or online, I have the opportunity to be honest and vulnerable. To learn from my mistakes in public. To grow my community by asking awkward questions and then listen, listen, listen. To speak up for others who cannot.

I have the power to effect change every day. We all do. However small it may seem.