

Paula Cole's tenth album, *Revolution*, fulfills the promise of her 1994 debut. Titled *Harbinger*, it hinted at what was to come in the singer-songwriter's life and career. It didn't so much foreshadow her subsequent accomplishments: the double-platinum second album, *This Fire*; her hit singles "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone" and "I Don't Want To Wait," her Best New Artist Grammy and an additional six Grammy nominations; or becoming a Grammy-nominated producer and founder of her own 675 record label. But *Harbinger* signaled Cole's dedication to breaking the silence of generations of women and giving voice to those left behind by history.

On *Revolution* Cole tells a wider story of all those sidelined by gender, age and race, beginning with her great-grandmother Charlotte, who hovers like a restless spirit over the album, first making an appearance in "Blues in Gray," in which generational choices are forced upon her, obliging her to choose marriage over education, household drudgery over self-realization.

Charlotte also appears in the tour de force, "Silent," the final song written for the album. More short story than song, it's painful and specific: Cole's voice trembles with uncomfortable memories of being a witness to abuse and then a victim of it herself. But it is not a victim's tale, it's the account of someone who learned that keeping quiet causes much more harm than speaking out -- even though she hears her great-grandmother's voice in her head instructing her to "hush." She has come to regret that unspoken advice over the years, and that realization is one of the inspirations for this album. On *Revolution*, Paula Cole speaks out, testifying loudly for all those who did not.

"Carl Jung says we are primarily guided by the unfinished hopes and dreams of our parents," Cole says quietly from her Massachusetts home. "My father didn't get to be a professional musician and loved music so passionately, so I studied jazz and dedicated my last album of jazz standards, *Ballads*, to him. My mother didn't really get to have expression until now -- I should say recognition -- because she was expressing herself by making art with whatever material she could find. Now, at the age of 76, she is making her first museum debut and a larger instillation next year. So I'm guided by generations of women who didn't have a voice."

But it's not just a women's album by any means. "Oh, God. Can we bury the Lilith Fair? I'm proud I did that, absolutely," says Cole, who appeared on two of the three female-centered tours. "But this is so much more a racial discussion."

She was moved by the work of Marvin Gaye, whom she covers here on "The Ecology (Mercy, Mercy Me);" Nina Simone and Bob Marley. "I was so inspired by [their] courage to stand up and interweave social justice themes with spirituality. Most of my heroes combine the two, if not in their words, then their deeds."

The title track, "Revolution (Is a State of Mind)," excerpts Martin Luther King's speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," delivered at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, eerily exactly one year before he was assassinated. When jazz pianist and singer Bob Thompson, from NPR's *Mountain Stage*, recites King's carefully considered words, it's a much-needed tap on the shoulder from the ethers.

Chilling and pure, the line “Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality” cuts deep. Powerful in its simplicity and certitude, it’s elevated by Nona Hendryx’s gospel moans and exhortations, blending with Cole’s pure, clear soprano to create a moving invocation.

King’s death is an important touchstone for Cole. “I was born the morning after MLK was shot. His death was a part of my life,” she explains. “My mom tells me how she cried together with the African-American OB/GYN nurse before she went under for my C-section. Many of my heroes and champions have been African Americans, and we as a nation have not come to terms with our horrific past and present.

“I have biracial family members, and I *must* write and sing about this. I wish a lot more white people would. I got sh*t for it when I made *Amen* in 1999, but over time it’s become a lot of people’s favorite album of mine, and I’m proud I stood up for social and political values. I encourage my writing students at Berklee College of Music, where I’ve taught for the last six years, to be a voice for the world. Picasso said, ‘Artists are the politicians of the future.’ I believe that to be true.”

If not a politician, Cole is something of a medium, a visionary, a lightning rod. On “7 Deadly Sins,” her longtime friend Meshell N’Degeocello defines, in inspired, almost academic prose, each sin in her throaty, alien but strangely reasonable voice, while a disembodied choir of what sounds like disappointed angels sings the name of each: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

But just recounting them is hardly enough. Cole wants action, and she means to get it ... without sacrificing compassion and conscience. As she sings on “Universal Empathy”:

*I want to get militant/I want to divide and scream.
But I think on Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream.
I know that in ev’ry soul regardless of their skin
Or age or sex or identity lies the empathy within.*

And as she girds to fight the big battles, Cole finds a place for the small important details in life. Second-wave feminists have reminded us since the late ‘60s that the “personal is political,” that it’s in that realm that the germ of change and awareness begins.

So, after the stirring mission statement of “Revolution (Is a State of Mind),” Cole pillages her own life, exploring familial and personal wounds, not sparing herself or those closest to her in her insistence on telling important and sometimes terrible truths.

It’s all grist for Cole’s mill, because she feels she owes that kind of honesty to her audiences. She is talking to the tribe, and in showing who she is, she allows them to see themselves more clearly. Because if anything, art is a mirror.

Q and A

How did you know when it was time to make a new album?

Paula Cole: It's a feeling that something's gestating in you, and it's an uncomfortable feeling that you're pregnant with something and you don't even know *what* it is yet. Maybe something someone says reminds you of the truth.

In 2017 I had released an album of jazz standards, called *Ballads*. I had recorded 31 songs in five days because I was so pent up as a jazz artist. I still am, and my left brain felt that I should be organizational and just release the follow-up of the other 12 jazz songs. But I was interrupted by this urgent feeling that I needed to be here and now.

When did you actually begin recording *Revolution*?

PC: We started recording when I was on tour last year. I think that was February of 2018. We had three days off in Florida, so I booked a studio in Clearwater, Florida. Normally, I plan out my recording sessions and I have all the songs already, but I had that feeling of gestation, a pregnant feeling. It was unusual for me to do, but I rented a house for my band and we stayed in Clearwater for a few days and went into an unknown studio and just created. It was a new discovery for me to do that, to try new work in the middle of a tour. It was based on that gut feeling of I need to do these songs now. We cut "Blues in Gray," "Shake the Sky," "Undertow (One Life Lost)," and "Dhammapada," and some of "Revolution" as well.

When I recorded those five songs, they were rudimentary. I lived with them, and that begat the writing of other songs, and it grew upon itself. With me looking out at the landscape of middle-aged women and seeing that we don't have as much voice and powerful positions as I think we should. That there's not equality yet in our world or our government. Turning 50 and being more at peace with myself, and 12 years deep in a relationship -- all of that allowed me to feel entitled to stand up for what I believe in and not feel afraid. I urged myself to do it, because we need this.

Was there a song that began the album?

PC: I think it was "Blues In Gray." It's about my great-grandmother Charlotte. I named my daughter after her. She was really ahead of her time, she was a brilliant pianist. Before they even let women into the college they let women into the music school at Yale. She was invited to tour with an orchestra as a pianist, but she was forbidden to do so [by her husband], and that was shameful. She married my great-grandfather and he informed her that he wanted five

children. She nearly died with each of the four births that she had, but he still wanted the fifth. She put her foot down and said, "I can't do it. I've almost died four times." So he divorced her, married again and had five children with his next wife.

Charlotte taught piano for the rest of her days; she even taught her granddaughter -- my mother -- piano. "Blues in Gray" tells the story of how she had to settle into the grayness of a stifled life after she married. How she kept silent all the years in that marriage, instead of realizing herself. She was silent about her talent, her voice, her potential. She was silent about not having freedom and artistry. Sublimating all that that she was, and then having it come out in future generations — having all of that passed to me.

I feel like I've been the first [woman in our family] who was able to express my talent as a female, as a young woman. My mom is doing that now, at 76, with her first art instillation in a museum. I'm so happy that she's lived long enough that she can also feel realized.

Dorothy, my grandmother on my mother's side, didn't really have full artistic expression either. The times didn't allow it, but she was liberated. She became a vegetarian at 83 and considered herself a humanist, and after the death of her husband, she moved to Berkeley, California, to study horticulture. My mother has been an artist her whole life, and definitely felt frustrated not being able to be all that she wanted to be in her career when she was raising us. I felt that frustration and it informed me a lot.

Where does *Revolution* fit in your body of work?

PC: All of the albums are stepping stones to this one, and it's all a map to me. A map to myself. To my story.

Can you talk about the order of the songs? It begins with the mission statement of "Revolution" and then dissolves into four personal songs, then ramps up again with "Seven Deadly Sins," then it ends with "Dhammapada." Was there a narrative arc that you were going for?

PC: Getting that right was so important to me. I spent a lot of time putting the songs on shuffle and just doing things around the house so I could make notes. Oh, that sounded really good; that segue into this song into the next. And then thinking about the lyrical arc; a thematic arc. So on the CD it begins with "Revolution" and ends with "Dhammapada." Then on the vinyl, which will be a double, it'll include "Hope Is Everywhere" and "Saint Cecilia." So in my mind I think of the 11 songs more than I do the extra two.

"Revolution," the first song, is really an introduction to the theme of the album: That there's love and there's self-revolution but there's also anger -- that's what Nona [Hendryx] personifies, that anger and the exhaustion. It's just so horrifying the more you learn about what this nation has put people of color through. The only reason we are a world power today is because of the cotton industry of the past, which was all based on free slave labor. It's so

horrific, and we've only continued to terrorize people of color. There is a lot about this country and this world that is enraging and exasperating and we must keep our wits about us. For *Revolution*, we must transform our anger into energy for good. Music helps us do this. The first song on the album is the battle cry. And the battle is largely within.

"Shake the Sky"?

PC: I was moved by that book *Half the Sky* [the 2009 book by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn about the oppression of women worldwide being the paramount moral challenge of the present era, much as the fight against slavery was in the past]. That's why I'm saying, "shake the sky." Just knowing every cellphone we hold is made by the small hands of Southeast Asian women who were grossly underpaid ... I wanted it to be a really simple song that we could convey onstage live with primarily voices, handclaps, and foot stomps. So it's really primal, tribal, sisterly and African, in a way.

I think that might be the real beginning of the album, because "Revolution" is the intro. My friend Darcel Wilson, who is such an amazing voice and such a dear friend of mine, joins me on that and one other song.

Then you go to "Blues in Gray" ...

PC: It's also a track where I'm talking for women. It's my plea and my hope that there will be change for women. Of course, which is a change for all people in the world, because if we're treating every person with respect it's just going to be a better world. The more people of color you empower, the better world it's going to be. The more women you empower, the better world it's going to be. This song also serves as a pivot to the four inner, highly personal songs of the album. The tender underbelly of *Revolution* is opened through my great-grandmother Charlotte's psychic whispering to me in this song. The door is opened and I continue with intimate matters at the heart of the album.

And "Silent"?

PC: The fourth track is "Silent," which goes right into the depth of things, not only my own silence with things that happen to me or things I've witnessed. Whether it's me being a bystander or me being a victim or me needing to feel like I have to be quiet at a party [because] I don't relate to the women in the kitchen, I don't relate to the men in the parlor. The realization that there's no place for me except silence, but I realize that's something I can't do anymore. Being silent is dysfunctional. It's dysfunctional to my health, to the health of society, and it disempowers the whole future chain of women, including me. My daughter's going to come to me and ask for help, and if I don't ever express my wounds then they're going to fester and I won't have answers for her, and I will just remain in this cyclical pattern of dysfunction, of silence. The millennial generation that I teach at Berklee has really helped me come to open up and talk about things rather than keeping quiet.

I don't know at what point you wrote album this but it feels like it's part of that zeitgeist that produced the Me Too movement. Were the songs a reflection of Me Too or was this all happening at the same time?

PC: The bravery of the Me Too movement definitely inspired me to write "Silent," which was the last song added to the album. Me Too opened a door for me. I feel I have a couple other songs now to write after that, and I haven't expressed all of myself fully yet. I think perhaps I'll write a book.

Sometimes songs are born with chords first or your hands are moving on an instrument, or sometimes they're born from a melody first that you sing in your head or you sing out loud when you're alone on a walk, but "Silent" was born from typing, like a writer. I was really moved by Bob Dylan's period in the '60s when he would sit at his typewriter and weave his social commentary into these beautiful poems and songs. That inspired me to try that style of writing. I try to come from different angles when I approach writing so I'm not repeating myself or going to the same keys or same places. I try to vary my approach, and I felt these words, I felt that heavy feeling of pregnancy, like something's gestating, a feeling I needed to express.

I'm most proud of "Silent" because I'm rejecting the advice that was handed down to me that I've witnessed doesn't work. It tears apart the bodies of women, it causes dis-ease, and it just perpetuates dysfunction. I'm rejecting that silence, and so it's partly a psychological victory for me. It's also terrifying and vulnerable, but I'm just proud that I could finally put that out there, and there's definitely more behind it.

Is the revolution women speaking out? Not being silent?

PC: That's right, and it's still happening before our eyes. There's still silence while states are outlawing freedom of choice. It's terrifying. It's quietly happening in the courts and we're not really speaking out enough about it. The Women's March -- that was profound. The sea of pink hats that were largely knit by women in their homes. That was a folk movement if I ever saw one in action. Taking yarn and knitting needles to make their point.

Tell me about the closing track, "Dhammapada."

PC: It's sayings from the Buddha that I put to music. They show the inner process, so beautifully stated by MLK, of finding love, finding empathy, that peace is the way, not violence (even though I often feel violent). That love itself is radical. I begin the album with MLK's words and end with sayings from the Buddha. I feel they are coming from the same intention and are some of the finest thoughts conjured by man.

Do you feel like you could've made this album any earlier? Your first album was called *Harbinger*. Did it feel like you were anticipating something that was the foreshadowing of what this album has become?

PC: Well, you're busting me. Yes, I hoped so. Having hope and faith in myself I felt, okay, this is who I am and I'm going to open the door to a long path of what I'm about to say over my lifetime. So, I knew what I was doing then. And when I look at each album title, it really says a lot about what I'm going through in the songs; bubbled up from my subconscious.

My songwriting process is highly autobiographical. I'm most moved by musicians who write and sing about their lives: John Lennon, Joni Mitchell, Peter Gabriel, Bob Marley, Neil Young. Writing songs is an intuitive process, sometimes tempered by craft and intellect. You sometimes have a fallow season that lasts for years. You can't beat yourself up. You just have to live as a human being first and hope your writing will improve as a result.

But *Harbinger* was the doorway to my process and *This Fire* really was a turbulent time. Sexual awakening, rebellion. I was rebelling against my parents and my staid New England background then. *Amen* was my wanting to express feelings of social justice and spirituality. Then I took seven years off, I came back with my daughter and I was mid-divorce proceedings while *Courage* was released. I spent two years in New York State divorce court, I was in an abusive marriage and it was a terrifically difficult time in my life. I was given sole custody and the ability to relocate and *Courage* was my mantra just to get out of that marriage and get my daughter and me safe and happy. Courage, courage, courage. It was every password I was using at the time, it was my mantra.

And then *Ithaca* was about me returning home [to New England]. The Odysseus cycle. I've gone out in the world and gotten beaten up, and I moved back to the very New England town I rejected in my twenties, Ithaca. I'm still singing about a lot of battle wounds that I've been through in previous years. Then I went off major labels and kind of flew independently with *Raven*. That represented freedom to me, because labels have been a negative experience for me. *7* is a gentle and reflective album looking at a lot at my life psychologically. It's very understated and overlooked, but I'm really proud of that one. *Ballads* was something I just needed to get off my chest my whole life. Early on I was offered a deal with a jazz label and I turned it down.

You spoke a lot about turning 50, and now you're 51. How did that change the way you did things? Did you feel some kind of seismic shift about the way you approached your work or the world, or the things you want or were important?

PC: Although it's just a number it did spark a lot of self-reflection and a sigh of relief in a way. Knowing that I'm here at the mountaintop and that I'm entitled to express my feelings, that I can tell myself that it'll be okay. I think I care less about what people think of me and that's liberating. I'll keep going on the path I believe to be just.

What did winning a Grammy allow you to do, and what did it prevent you from doing?

PC: Well, it allows my sound engineer, Frank DeGennaro, who used to do sound for Ornette Coleman--He's such a beautiful man. He's 69, Vietnam vet-- to say, "Ladies and gentlemen,

Grammy-award winner Paula Cole,” and they clap for me. It gives me a title like doctor or professor, and that’s about it. I don’t look to it for much more than that. I’m grateful for it.

