I am not the next big thing: on creativity and aging



What happens when the context of your creative output changes, but the passion remains?

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As told to Mike Pace, 1672 words.

Tags: Music.

The bulk of my 20s were spent in a rock band called Oxford Collapse. We toured extensively, signed to a well-regarded indie label, put out a handful of varyingly well-received records, played to very few people, played to lots of people, slept on a lot of floors, and spent a lot of time with like-minded people. We were never more than moderately successful on a grand scale—no one is clamoring for a reunion—but we dug in our heels and left a little mark. It remains, for better and worse, the defining creative experience of my life.

The band ended, amicably, when I turned 30 (as it should have?), and the next 10 years were spent doing "life" things: getting married, having children, getting a job, buying a house, and of course, starting a podcast. There were still songs; I dabbled in the weird world of production music before ultimately finding a fulfilling job in music licensing. Between kids, I recorded and released two solo albums containing some of the best music I've written (as it should be?) that has been heard by hundreds and purchased by dozens. I no longer have a band (you try scheduling a practice for a bunch of people in their mid-to-late 30s) and touring in any real capacity is no longer on the table.

The context of the way I make music has changed; I do it on my own (with a handful of talented people making crucial contributions) and no longer for a living, but also because I can't, and don't want to stop doing it. The question I grapple with, though, is *how do I deal with the fact that no one cares anymore?*

Before you write this off as a pity party, I recognize it's all gravy from here on out for me. My band went farther than most and I'm reminded regularly that it laid the groundwork for a number of great things in my life, from my job to many of my friendships. It's also provided a table-scrap of name recognition and a very, very modest fanbase for future projects, so it's not as if I'm truly starting from scratch. That little leg up, combined with increasingly convenient ways to record, means that for me, the music-making part of the equation is oftentimes the easiest, and definitely most fun part of the overall creative experience. I can afford to pay for equipment and compensate the folks who work with me. I know the freedom to make music how and when I want to is a luxury. I try not to forget or take this for granted.

It's hard to put into words how great it feels when you can write a song you're happy with out of the sounds pinging around in your head. It may take awhile to complete, and oftentimes it goes in a different direction than you originally anticipated, but there's nothing quite like the gratification of listening to your creation and then feeling good enough about it to share it with the world. That's when I like my music most: When it's just for me before I put it out there, which is a selfish but honest take. It's once the songs are out there and I hear them through others' ears that the flaws become apparent; I think you'd find many musicians who can empathize with this sentiment.

Back in my band days, there'd be a litany of tour dates and the full weight of label machinery to promote a

record. Now it's just me, Bandcamp, and a smattering of local solo shows on the calendar. The post-release blues usually begin once the analytics, which were rarely a concern in the past, start rolling in (sadly, maybe this is how we should start defining "rock 'n roll?") and it's apparent how many people *aren't* listening. The continued splash of ice water to the face that is unforgiving, refreshed quantitative data courtesy of digital distributors and streaming services lets me know in no uncertain terms that people aren't responding how I'd hoped, or they're only half-listening and moving on. These numbers don't tell the whole story, but they're not lying either. *Nobody likes you!* The inevitable self-doubt starts pouring out: *Is there something off about my record? Could I have given a better vocal performance? Is my voice just bad and my songs too saccharine? Did I hit my creative peak ten years ago? Have I always just been a middling type of guy who, to quote a memorably critical VICE review, "gets a couple As and a couple Cs?"*

Some of these are questions artists might ask themselves at any point in their career. Some are unfair and self-defeating, and some feel like I'm making excuses for why people aren't listening or talking about my work, which is overall about response—a separate but not unrelated aspect of the whole music-making experience. Look, I'm no 20-year-old SoundCloud rapper… but maybe one day I'll be the father of one!

Speaking of which, part of the challenge is how much things have changed for bands operating around my level in the ensuing years since Oxford collapsed. Artists are increasingly less dependent on labels, "cred" doesn't count for much, there's a never-ending need to be a "presence" on social media, songs are released as they're made, and albums are starting to be talked about as if they're in the rear view while listeners get force-fed disparate song suggestions by retention-based algorithms.

Let's get real: I'm a 40-year old white man with the musical tastes of a 70-year old, whose songs were once described as "Blink-182 meets Ben Folds," which is tough but ultimately not inaccurate. I am not the next big thing. Blogs don't really get much out of covering me. Social media is exhausting and besides, diapers need to be changed and dinner needs to be made.

My band ended right before Twitter and Facebook became ubiquitous so I subsequently missed those trains, and to paraphrase Sir Mick, "I can't get no Twitter traction." I'm cringing as I type this, but I benefited from being part of the MySpace era, which was an exciting way to connect with people around music. Ten years removed from my last notable musical endeavor is a lifetime. Sometimes I feel like the poor schnook who's interviewed (and subsequently pummeled) by "Rowdy" Roddy Piper in this infamous Piper's Pit clip. But… BUT… I still do it because in my heart and bones I love writing and recording songs.

And there *are* people who will respond to and cover your work. Maybe not many, but they're out there and just need to be found (and in some cases bugged politely, but repeatedly). You'll have to dig a little deeper because the big guys can't be bothered, but there's always an audience somewhere. There's a little rush that comes with the attention, but it's ephemeral and in the big picture not what it's all about. Ultimately you don't have much control over who's listening, so just be grateful someone somewhere is.

It also won't happen immediately. If you're not in folks' faces either online or onstage it's hard to stay front of mind. It might take someone six months or six years to stumble on my songs (provided they haven't disintegrated to digital dust by then), and that's okay; there are records from 45 years ago I'm just discovering, too. But in that immediate post-release moment it feels magnified: I want instant gratification and a *response* because that's the way we're conditioned nowadays, and we're allowed to be frustrated, up to a point. More questions bubble up: *Why am I doing this if it's basically only for myself?* (You're not, see above). *I guess this is a hobby now?* (So what? It's probably more fulfilling than collecting neon beer signs). *Isn't that pathetic?* (No.) *Who are these 21-year-old assholes with blogs who seemingly only cover music played at H&M?* (Maybe not your "target market?") *Who the fuck emerges in rock n' roll as a new artist in their 40s?* (Is that what you really want, Dad?)?

Thankfully I can only dwell on this for so long before there's an involuntary hard reset and I start getting excited for something new. There's a seemingly unending well of inspiration and ideas periodically making themselves known to me and I've gotta be ready for the next one.

Deep down I care more about my work than anyone else ever will, and that'll inevitably lead to temporary disappointment when I don't get the reaction I want, but that's a *good* thing. You want to care deeply about what you create, even if it's hard to square the response or lack thereof, regardless of what stage of your career you're at. Ultimately that response is only part of the overall experience of making music and it's one I can't control. I again remind myself why I do this in the first place: I love the feeling that comes with making music, even if it's in my basement now after the kids have gone down and not onstage at a Mexican restaurant in Saskatoon on some godforsaken tour across Western Canada. I'm glad I did that then, but it's unfair to compare the experience of playing in a band that "did stuff" in the mid aughts to being a dad with a day job self-releasing music at the dawn of the apocalypse.

I'll continue to record songs in a way that works for me and put them out in a similar fashion, and do my best to let the world know they exist. Maybe someone somewhere will hear it, but I've only got so much control over that. Then I'll play with my kids and make dinner with my wife and go to work and go on vacation and eventually do it all again because I'm addicted to the joy the music itself brings. The context changes but the passion remains.

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