Musician and designer Jason Gnewikow on changing lanes



August 24, 2017 - Jason Gnewikow is a musician, creative director, and fragrance designer based in New York City. He currently serves as creative director at a design agency called Athletics and is a partner in Carlen Parfums. When asked to explain his particularly circuitous career path, Gnewikow says, "I think the reason even that I've done all these projects is because I get obsessed with things and then I want to figure out how they work. Sometimes that just turns into a job."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2288 words.

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I first knew you as the guitarist in The Promise Ring, but you've been working as a designer in NYC for well over a decade now. Did you study design?

No. I never really went to school. I went to an alternative high school in which every graduating class had about 12 people. I had a teacher who encouraged me—she was actually my gym teacher, but then she also ran this computer class. I had already been interested in design and so I started playing around with it. She got all the design software and these computers and it was just basically me doing it, nobody else.

So that's how I started doing design. After I graduated high school I made a deal with my dad. I was like, "If you'll buy me a computer, I'll go to college." I started that semester but it was right when Promise Ring started. I fully intended to go to school, but the band was going out on tour. I didn't think anything would really happen with the band. I was just like, "Oh, we're on some horrible tour and it will be really grueling but also probably really fun and we'll come back and I'll return to my normal life and finish school." But then Promise Ring just started to take off and after we got offered our first tour of Europe I basically just ditched school and moved on.

When Promise Ring was active as a band, were you also doing projects on the side? Were you designing stuff for the band?

Yeah, I was doing all the stuff for the band and then that flowered out into my designing stuff for Jade Tree. They signed Joan of Arc and Cap'n Jazz and I started working with Tim Kinsella on design stuff for those bands. It was amazing. I started designing the Joan of Arc records, the first three, and some singles and stuff. That was how it all started. Throughout the rest of the band's career I just kept doing that stuff. I was doing tons of music packaging, but that was it.

When the band ended how did you segue into being a full-time designer?

The band split up when I was 28. I just remember having this feeling of, "Well that was really awesome but it ran its course and now it's over." That was eight years of my life. I remember thinking, "Do I realistically think that I could start over and do another band and have it be as moderately successful as The Promise Ring was?" I was really into design at that point and it just seemed like a good time to try and totally change lanes. That's what I did.

We split up in the fall on some tour and when I got home Joan of Arc was actually coming out to NYC for CMJ so I was like, "Can I hitch a ride with you guys?" I came to New York and basically decided on the spot to move here. I went back home, looked for an NYC apartment on Craigslist, packed my shit up after Christmas and drove out here

and just stayed here for good. For the first six months I was living in Bushwick not doing really anything and just trying to figure out how to get design work. Eventually I connected with some other designers and we decided to start working together. The wheels kind of just kept moving after that.

And now you are a creative director at an agency called Athletics. How did that happen?

Athletics basically started as just a collective model where it was like everyone involved sort of had their own business. It was me and Matt Owens and a bunch of other designer friends. If somebody had a big project we would all just collaborate on it together and then just pay each other. Scope it, budget it, do it. It was a cool model because it was kind of like you could work as much or as little as you wanted to. If there was a project that you were like, "Nah, I don't really want to do that," then you didn't have to and then you weren't really beholden to anybody because there was no financial tie to it. We did that for about five years. Eventually there was a point where we were like, "Well, we've already spent this much time doing this thing together, might as well take it to the next level." We incorporated the business and we've been doing it that way since.

Are you overseeing multiple projects on a day to day basis?

Yeah. At any give time there's probably 10 or 12 projects going on in the studio, varying degrees of scale, and then we have an Account Manager and then another designer and I usually run most of the creative side. We have another partner who does all the digital stuff. The four of us basically run all the projects. We're still rolling up our sleeves and doing the design work too. We also have several full-time designers working on stuff with us.

How does it feel doing creative work on behalf of someone else as opposed to working on creative projects that are totally your own?

It's something that I've struggled with because doing music packaging and working for other artists, there were certainly times when it felt like they were a client, but I prefer when it doesn't feel that way. When I was doing all the stuff for Joan of Arc, I was working with Tim Kinsella and it was more of a feeling like, "We're collaborating on this weird art project," and it was really fun and cool and it didn't feel so much like work. Obviously he had final say on the designs, but it was more of a collaboration. I try to bring that mentality along into what we're doing today, even though it's not always totally possible. Not everything is going to be your passion project and there are things you have consider when trying to please a client, but it's important to stay connected to the creative aspect of what you're doing.

What are your personal design projects unrelated to your studio work?

Well, recently some friends and I worked on a hotel upstate, Graham & Co, which was a super fun project. We did all the brand identity and designed all the rooms and did the experiential part of it, which was amazing. There is also Carlen, which is the fragrance line I do with my partner, Jeff Madalena. He also owns OAK.

That's a wild creative arc, to go from playing guitar in an indie rock band to designing fragrances.

It's funny because I feel like there's actually so many similarities. It all comes from the same impulse, whether it's writing a song or making a perfume or creating a piece of graphic design or a developing a concept—they're all the same thing. I was never actually an amazing musician. It was more about crafting or designing a song or a piece of music. I wasn't like Elliott Smith or something, music wasn't just flowing out of me. It was more like, "Cool, we're writing this thing, let's try and figure it out." The recording process was another extension of the process—what else can you do to it, how can you rearrange it and produce. Each song was like it's own little creative project that needed to be worked out, which was always really fun.

Design is the same process and even making a perfume is the same process. I guess there's a weird punk rock ethos to how I think about making things. Maybe you don't really know how to play your instrument but if you can do something where it feels like there's a genuine emotional connection—whether that's a piece of music or a

fragrance or piece of design—it's all the same thing.

How do you learn how to design fragrances? I just assumed that was the work of chemists or something.

Designing a fragrance is so crazy. There's the chemical part of it—how do these things go together? I mean, you should really have a ton of knowledge to do it. That's why I say it's the same thing as writing music for me. With all of these things, I'm really figuring it out as I go along. I don't have any design education. I didn't study chemistry. In both cases it's been very intuitive. You learn it by actually doing it. Of course there are plenty of people who go to school and study design and get a Master's degree and that's great too, obviously. It's just a different way of approaching things. I've just always found that if you are really interested in something, or if you really happen to love it, you'll figure out a way to do it.

How do you teach yourself to make fragrances?

I just did it. For about a year it was what I did every weekend. I was just reading everything I could, finding things, buying ingredients and just having a go at it. I accumulated all of these ingredients at our place upstate and I'd be there with these crazy spreadsheets of ingredients.

The way I've been doing it, it starts out really simply where I'm counting the drops of something and checking the measurements and weighing them on a scale and checking the rules about how much any specific ingredient is okay to use. For example, tons of citrus oils make you photosensitive, so there are rules about how much of that ingredient can be in any given thing and what percentage it can be made up of. I have this super elaborate spreadsheet that basically charts all of that stuff and you put it in as you go and then once you have something that you like, that feels like a scent you could wear, then you catalog what you've done and there will often be dozens of variations and you catalog those as well.

Do you have other creative aspirations? Other kinds of projects you want to tackle?

I don't know. I think the reason even that I've done all these projects is because I get obsessed with things and then I want to figure out how they work. Sometimes that turns into a job. Sometimes that leads you down this path of you're just doing it, maybe you stay with it or maybe eventually you're just, "I figured that out," or "I played around with it long enough and I don't care about it anymore." I could imagine eventually not being at a design studio every day and doing something totally different, or maybe the fragrance thing will end up taking up more of my time.

In the last few years, doing interiors and designing houses and stuff has become really exciting too. That's this whole other weird world. Working on that hotel was a nice way to scratch that itch to some degree. I could never imagine being retired because I'm totally restless and always want to do something else. Maybe when I'm old I'll start making pottery or something.

So many people get locked into this one idea of what they imagine themselves being able to do. It's nice to be reminded that you can end up doing something totally different than what you might have expected, even if you didn't go to school for it.

It's funny because in our design studio we have all these different people and they come from all these different backgrounds. The guy who does all of our digital stuff is a trained chef and worked for Tom Colicchio as a chef and then helped him build this whole crazy fulfillment system because he also happened to be a total math nerd too, then he then transitioned out of that. When I moved to New York as a designer, I was like, "I've been playing music for forever and I designed a bunch of music packaging," which is pretty lightweight experience for design in terms of what I have to do now on a daily basis. The amount of stuff that I've learned in the last 12 years is staggering to me.

It's all real-world knowledge that you just gained by doing it.

Totally. I like the “figuring it out by actually doing it” method. Part of that is always operating with the understanding that there is more to learn. In our design studio, for example. We definitely don’t run it like, “We’re your bosses. You design things and then we approve them.” We’re working on projects together and we’re all in this together and we need to figure this out together. If I design it and that’s the solution, great. If you design it and that’s the solution, that’s great too. Having younger people around you is always a way good to learn new things and absorb new technologies. Even if I eventually retire to Palm Springs to become an elderly ceramicist and handbag designer, I still hope to be learning something new.

5 things recommended by Jason Gnewikow:

Pet Shop Boys - Almost everything.

Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career by George Plimpton

John Pawson

Song Exploder Podcast

Materia

Name
Jason Gnewikow

Vocation
Designer, Musician

Fact

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