On the questions all artists should ask themselves

Musician Billy Corgan opens up about creativity, process, and the cosmic questions everyone should consider.

April 16, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3225 words.

Tags: Music, Focus, Inspiration, Process, Identity, Success, Anxiety, Mental health.

I want to talk to you about your creative process.

I support this topic. I can say for somebody who's been interviewed thousands of times, as an artist I talk about creative process the least, which is really strange to me because the reason I'm sitting there is because of the creative process. Instead, it always ends up being about T-shirts and indie politics and pretty teeth and it's just so strange to me because at some point it's like, "Doesn't somebody want to know what's in this fucking car engine?" Most people really don't. I'm not saying they don't care, it's just not their point of entry.

How has your attitude and approach towards making music evolved over the years? Your recent solo work presents you as someone who is perhaps a little more at peace with himself than you used to be.

I've quoted it so many times—I always paraphrase it—but there's the four stages of enlightenment vis a vis the Buddha. One is total consciousness. The other is total unconsciousness. The third is the need to believe in total consciousness or attachment, and the need to *not* believe in attachment. Only by going through those four processes can you achieve enlightenment. In essence, attachment and non-attachment are just same sides of the duality coin and then needing to believe in those ideologically is the next thing.

To answer the question faithfully, I feel like I'm at a stage now where the process of attachment or non-attachment has very little to do with my actual work, and that's really hard-won. That was not an easy fucking path, because I attached my creativity early on to survival and that's a very dubious path. I even had this strange revelation recently. At the age of 50, you don't have a lot of them. They don't come as fast and furious as they once did, but when they come, they come, and they hit you because it's like "I haven't thought about this. How have I not thought of this?"

I had this realization the other day. I was like, "Wow, I really looked to the music business to be like a surrogate father." I really wanted these men in these boardrooms to be the good dad that I never had. I really only had one man in the music business in my *entire* history in the music business that was that man for me. It was Phil Quartararo, who I'm still friends with even though he's only tangentially still in the business. Phil was a radio guy who became an A&R guy or whatever and became president of Virgin and then went on to be the head of Warner Brothers for a while. He was the only man who would give me his word and follow through on his word and not inconsequentially he was at the helm of my most productive and successful period, because I needed someone to be that person.

I never had that person in my own life. I needed someone to run cover for me. I remember once telling him, "If you tell me that something is important, I'm just going to believe you. I've never given that power to anybody." You know what I mean? I was always the paranoid street kid. It was always, "You're going to fuck me eventually, it's just a matter of when and it's a matter of how long we can spin this narrative out." It caused me so many problems. I remember Phil would call me on the phone and say, "Look, you've got to do this." I would bitch and complain and give him my theoretical seven million reasons and he'd say, "Look, just trust me." He was that guy. Fuck, I wish I had 40 of those guys. I would've done a lot more good work and I would've saved myself a lot of pain and torture. I really feel at this point I'm more of a Vaudevillian or something. I'm out of time. My skill set is not really applicable to the world as it exists. I'm just going to do my work and it's going to go where it's going to go.

Does success warp the simple joy of just making songs?

No. I never had that problem so much. I was more like an egoist who was always looking for a mandate, and when I had it I didn't always carefully consider my options. I was more of a slash and burn, scorched Earth kind of person—hence making a record like *Adore* after *Mellon Collie*. I could say something like, "*Adore* was exactly the right move at exactly the right time and the only mistake I made was not making sure there was hit singles." The character flaw in that moment was that I got everything I wanted, I did everything the way I wanted to do. Through force of will, I got the vision I was after and it held. You can still hear it. It didn't wither away with time, but my ego got in the way of just being pragmatic.

Rick Rubin actually recorded a song for that album called "[Let Me Give the World to You.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mljNsPk0ClE){:target="_blank"}" It didn't fit in the sequence so I tacked it on at the end and it actually worked. It was like a sunshine coda after a dark journey. I remember being in this $20,000 a month mansion overlooking Los Angeles, living the dream, right? I'm in the pool and I'm listening to the album and I remember listening to the whole sequence and going, "Okay, is 'Let Me Give The World to You' going to work at the end of the sequence?" I'm thinking, "Yeah, that's pretty good. I can live with it," and knowing it was like my ace in my pocket. If you need a single, there it is. I handed it to the label and three days later they called and they said, "Okay, we want 'Let Me Give The World to You' to be the first single." My immediate reaction was "Fuck no!" and I took it off the album entirely. It was like, you're not going to subvert my masterwork by releasing the pop single first. Instead, we set up the whole thing by making the weird "Ava Adore" video first, which is influential in its own right, but if I was pragmatic, I could've had it all.

This is all Monday morning quarterbacking I realize, but the point is, I had everything in my axis but my vision was guided not by gross sociopathic survival—which is the hallmark of the music business, probably the entire entertainment business—but this *other* kind of survival which was, "My voice must stay intact no matter what." That's a different negotiating tactic. The voice is what keeps me here and the survival comes from the means of production which sustains the voice… and that was the loop for 25 years. Eventually you exhaust that.

When it comes to process and music-making, are you a creature of habit?

Totally. Early morning riser. I tend to work the moment I get up. Probably the vast majority of my strong work is done in the morning between 7:00 am and 10:00. After that I don't have the same level of focus and concentration. The house gets loud or the day just kicks in, whatever. I can work pretty much anywhere though. It's interesting, I never really talk about this. This is one out of 300 interviews that I do that people actually ask me what I actually do. What I *really* do. If you ask, "What are you?" I say I'm a writer. The "performer" is a whole other thing, a whole other mess.

You have proven yourself to be extremely prolific over the years. Are you a hoarder of ideas? Do you stockpile things?

Hmm. Well, I do a ton of research. I follow the silver cord wherever it goes. It's a lot of synchronicity stuff. It's weird. This is the kind of thing that often happens. I'll be having a conversation with somebody about, say, a particular aspect of the Civil War. I'll go into a bookstore. I'll randomly see a book about the Civil War. I'll pick up the book and I'll say, "Oh this is interesting," and I buy the book for $5. I take the book home. I go to bed. I try to read a little but before I go to bed at night, so I open the book and in the first three pages, it talks about the specific thing I was just talking about. Your subconscious is always always working.

How about this? It happens less than it used to, but it still happens. I would work on a song all day and have an arrangement. Wake up the next morning at 7:00 in the morning and my mind—or rather my unconscious mind—would have written a new arrangement during the night. When I'd wake up, the arrangement from the day before, which I'd worked on for 12 hours, has now been supplanted by the arrangement that my brain worked out while I was sleeping. When I wake up I play the new arrangement and it's what I was looking for all day before, but I had nothing to do with it. That's fucking weird. There's a lot of that. I just learned to trust it.

Has your way of writing music changed radically over the years?

No, not really. Form follows function.

And you typically write on a piano or guitar?

Yeah. People who are fans tend to get bummed out when I reveal too much of the wizard/curtain bit. They're really bummed out when they find out that I am constructing these realities and the realities are not constructing me. The bad analogy I use is, if you're a good chef you can make good Mexican food, good Italian food, good Greek food. You just to have to know what you're doing. You have to have the skill and then the personality to imbue, let's call it the systemic idea of what is a good Greek meal, and give it your own spin. Same can be true of making songs.That bums people out. They tend to want to identify you in a personality way with the work, but I think mastery is not always about your personality. The actor doesn't become the part. The actor is skilled at convincing you that they become the part. It's easy to slide too easily into this really emotive energies where you are not in control. What is mastery if you're not in control? I guess the point I'm trying to make poorly is, I'm a believer that mastery in the arts requires both an ability to lean into the emotional quality but to have mastery over it.

Do you need a good editor? And is that what a good producer can do for you?

The relationship with producers can be weird. Most of them are just day camp directors, unfortunately. That's why I couldn't work with most of them because that's their modality. Support the ego, hype man in the corner, and then secretly when the artist is out getting laid and doing cocaine they go in and fix things. I've talked to those guys through the years and their stories are wild. They're like, "Oh, yeah. So and so would leave the studio and I'd just stay up all night, fix everything, and even go sing vocals myself." What's the famous thing? Mutt Lange would go in and sing the Def Leppard guy's parts and the guys from Def Leppard wouldn't even know it was Mutt Lange imitating them singing? That crazy level of whatever-ness.

So do you need a producer?

Yeah. I do. I need a producer *and* I resent needing a producer. I do. Not to bring up the merits of my production skills but I resent needing anybody. That's part of the maturity thing, I guess. Knowing when you need people and admitting it.

Then why do you need a producer?

As a songwriter I feel like I've worked out how I feel about making things, but as an artist in the world I haven't solved the thing of "Who do I need to be?" or "What do I need to be?" or "What do you require of me to speak to you?" The way I've worked it out in my brain is: I don't listen to music, you do. The "you" in general. Shouldn't I be more graceful to want you to get the best translation of what I've made? I'm not making the music for myself. I've already made the music for myself so why wouldn't I want you to have the most pleasing or inviting or clear experience of the music? That's what a producer like Rick Rubin afforded me on the last record. He had a clear vision of what I was trying to say and did it in a way that is instantly recognizable. I bow down to that because I haven't sorted that out in myself—where I can both be a vicious raconteur at a cellular DNA level and then four steps down the road flip and be a populist.

I think this circles back around to when my creativity was predicated on survival. I didn't make that exchange for you. I made it for me. I'd have this very specific vision and then I'd get four steps down the road and then my thinking process is "*Now* I am going to figure it out because I need you to like what I'm doing. I need you to be attracted to what I'm doing, and if I don't do that, I'm going to die or drown." When I reached a point where I no longer needed that, when I stopped paying attention to it, that's when I started to falter. *Adore* is the critical juncture where I said, "I'm going to do what I want to do and I'm no longer going to consider that."

When you're making music, are you trying to get to a place where you can say, "Ok, I've made these 10 songs, I think they're beautiful. It's about this thing I feel really passionate about. If people love it, great. If they don't love it, that's OK too?"

You have to reach a point where that no longer affects the work…but don't believe any artist who tells you they're not affected. The only way I can intellectually understand it—at least for my own experience—is like this: I had nothing, then I had something, then I had less of something, and I had to learn to accept all variations of it, and then I had to make the critical decision that I was going to continue knowing that no one could guarantee me anything. Only by writing at that point did I finally feel free.

Do you feel free now?

Yeah. I do, actually. It's funny because I'm actually more dangerous than I've ever been, but no one perceives me as dangerous. I feel a little bit like a spy in the henhouse. I'm actually very dangerous right now because I am totally free. It's weird to say it but I know it and that's it.

Look, I'm going to make *something*. I'm going to know that it's valuable and I'm so certain of its value that it doesn't matter if anybody values it. That is the ultimate freedom. However, that doesn't mean you don't have a sentient consciousness and that you would prefer it to be seen.

If you're a true humanist, which I like to believe I am, you cannot raise yourself above the level of somebody else's voice. In that sense, if you're willing to go to the truly humanist level of, "I believe I have something to offer and I want my offering to be the part of the conversation" then you must also embrace the idea that if I truly value *you*, I'm also going to accept that you have something to offer even if it's not a song. It could be a meal, it could be a prayer, it could be a poem, it could be a dance, it could just be a hello. If you're going to come off the ego mountain and go to a level of a human sentience, awareness, you have to accept that your work is no more valuable than anyone else's, than the work of those people whose names you don't know.

That mode of thinking jacks you into the way larger cosmic discussion of why the fuck are we here and what does it matter if 99.999% of great works on the planet will never be seen, will never be influential, will never mean diddly squat? What is this urge that we have to communicate or share? Those are important questions for any artist to ask themselves. As long as you can sit there—which is hard to do when you're in this realm—but as long as you can sit there then you can come to a place of, "I'm going to put this all in the right perspective and I'm gonna roll with that." Then I think it's a good place to be. If the aliens are listening to me in 100 years on Planet Zircon, great! And if they're not, I took the chance. That's a different space to be in than just thinking, "Did the record get added to the right playlists? Did you get the good review? How much did we sell?"

That's a great cosmic perspective in which to view things. Also, you never know how history will view the work. You mention *Adore* as a moment when things might have gone a little sideways, but I know a lot of people for whom that record is important. A lot of people love that record the most.

I can't tell you how many people have told me it's the go-to album when they lose somebody because it's imbued with the struggle of grief. The overwhelming wave of "What is this fucking black cloud?" is all over that record. One of the best questions that can come out of a conversation like this, a discussion of creativity, is the bigger existential question of "Why bother?" And that goes into an even deeper question which is, "Why are we here?" I think it's the perfect question to ask and it's the question that nobody can answer.

Essential Billy Corgan:

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Gish* (1991)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Siamese Dream* (1993)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* (1995)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Adore* (1998)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Machina/The Machines of God* (2000)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Machina II/The Friends & Enemies of Modern Music* (2000)

Billy Corgan - *TheFutureEmbrace* (2005) solo album

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Zeitgeist* (2007)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Teargarden by Kaleidyscope* (2009–2014)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Oceania* (2012)

The Smashing Pumpkins - *Monuments to an Elegy* (2014)

William Patrick Corgan - *Ogilala* (2017) solo album

Name
Billy Corgan

Vocation
Musician, Songwriter

Alpha Pan