Brandon Flowers on ambition

September 5, 2017 - Brandon Flowers is a singer and songwriter in The Killers, a rock band from Las Vegas, Nevada that has sold over 22 million albums since releasing their debut in 2004. The band will release their fifth studio album, *Wonderful Wonderful*, this September. When asked what advice he might have for up and coming musicians, he offered the following: "I tell them that you've got to listen to your heart. Is this song good enough? You really think it's good enough? Is that chorus good enough that you want to show it to people and play for them? Can you imagine people singing along to that? There's nothing wrong with trying, you know? It's OK to be ambitious. It's ok to want to be good."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2777 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Success.

The Killers have been making records for well over a decade now. Do you find that the way you think about making music—or the process you go about it when you're all together—has changed much over the years?

Yeah. When we first started, we were all living in the same town, in close proximity. We were pretty regimented for being such a young band. We would go to Ronnie's house, our drummer, and work almost every day. He had a drum set in the garage, the classic thing.

I'd go straight from work, and we'd just juggle around people's schedules. I had the most normal job, I guess, so it would usually revolve around when I got off work. I'd show up to practice, and I'd still be in my bellman uniform from the Gold Coast Casino. That's how it was when we were working on *Hot Fuss*. It was fun. We were a unit. It just slowly changed over time. It's not that we're not still the same band, we're just not that anymore. We're still a band. We still have these four distinct personalities, and we each still have the same duty within the band. But now somebody lives in San Diego. Somebody lives in Utah. Somebody lives in Vegas. Somebody's always traveling. How do we make this work? We've all got kids, and wives, and bills, and whatever. Everything is different now. I'm not down the street from everybody. When we can get together, that's an ideal situation, but everybody understands that it ain't 2003. You organize your time differently. It's just different.

One hallmark of all Killers records is that, on a very molecular level, you just seem to understand how pop music works. There are always hooks, there are always big choruses.

It's important to us. I think it's the respect for the craft and for what has come before us. That's a part of it. I feel some sort of duty to the tradition of songwriting. I don't feel like I'm a conformist, I just feel an obligation to carry the torch, I guess. There are so many great songs that came before us, and those aren't going anywhere. You can always go download them, or whatever the hell you're going to do, to hear them. I want to keep it rolling, you know? I want to do right by that tradition of what it means to make good songs.

Your band seemed to emerge almost fully-formed. When *Hot Fuss* hit in 2004, you were ready for it, as if you'd sort of been rehearsing your entire life for that moment.

It *seemed* like it. [*laughs*] I don't know that we actually were. I wasn't ready to be interviewed. I've been cleaning up a lot of the mess that I made on the first couple albums. I didn't think about what it all meant, or what I was doing. I just knew that I loved music, and I wanted to write songs. I sort of got intimidated by journalists and would say crazy things. I'm not saying they were out to intimidate me, I just felt intimidated. We were this little band from Las Vegas, so going to New York City, I mean… I *still* get intimidated when I come here. So yeah, I didn't always say the right thing, but it was always coming from the right place. It just bummed me out because that stuff tarnished a little bit of what we were doing because the music was strong.

As I've grown older, I think it's helped to get rid of some of that stuff. The other guys in the were a little older than me and I think they were a little better suited for it. I was just 21. It's strange to think about that now. The arc of a band is to sort of grow up as you go on, right?

Going back to bands that I grew up with, I think about a band like Depeche Mode. It wasn't until five records in, even six, that they really hit their stride. *Violator* was their seventh record, I think. Those are the cooler stories, I think. Bands that grow up together and evolve over time. Then you sort of find what you really are. We just came out so bombastic. We couldn't help it.

One of the things that drove me the craziest in regards to writing about indie-rock in the early 2000s was often this kind of fake humility that so many bands seemed to have, as if they were embarrassed to risk anything by trying too hard and unwilling to ever appear as if they cared too much. I appreciated that you were always like, "We're fucking great and these are the best songs ever." You kind of need some element of that to succeed as a rock band. Ego isn't always bad.

I was definitely going against that fake modesty thing. I felt that really strongly when we were first starting. I didn't understand it. I felt like I was seeing through the bullshit and the fake humility, and I wondered why other people weren't seeing it. I mean, you got to have *something* to get up on the stage in front of people that is telling you, "You can do this," or that you are worth it. I can't believe how many people buy it that those people on stage don't feel like that. It was frustrating for me. I kind of kicked against it when we first came out.

When you were a kid, were you a performative person?

No. It wasn't until I was in the band. I never dreamed of it. I would play golf a lot when I was a kid. I would be by myself and I would sing the songs that I loved, things from *Louder than Bombs* or Oingbo-Boingo and stuff like that. But I didn't think I was a singer or that I was creative. Nobody in my family was creative. This was a surprise to everybody.

Sometimes the best education is really just being obsessed with the thing you make. For pop music or rock music, maybe if you listen to it enough and you absorb it and love it in a profound way, those forms just get imprinted on you. Then when you try and go make it yourself, those song structures are just a part of your consciousness.

Yeah. I think it's *how* you're listening to it. Everybody has the stuff that they like, but maybe some people's brains are just sort of taking notes when you're not even aware of it. Mine definitely was, because some of it—making songs—just seems really natural to me.

It's also hard work. When we first started, I just sort of thought I was god's gift, and then the older I got, and the more I was exposed to other music, it just chipped away at that statue of myself. I can't believe how much has been done, and how many great songs have been written, and how many masters there have been that I didn't even know yet. That's been a great experience for me, but it also looms over everything you do. It's always looming now. Once you know what's been done, it makes it tougher. You can't be naïve. You know what you are competing with.

How do you articulate why something works or why something doesn't in a song. Is it just a feeling?

There is a truth to the whole idea of collective conscious. It's there. It's amazing when you're a part of it and you tap into it. It's so frustrating when you go through a dry spell because if you know what that feels like, then you also know when you're not getting there. I've gone on some long roads where I wasn't getting there.

When there is a dry spell and it's not working, are you someone who takes a break and goes for a walk? Or do you just push through it?

I sort of persevere and keep pushing, even though I don't know if that really works for me. I think I should go on more walks. [*laughs*] Maybe I'll try that more next time. It's just really frustrating, and you want it to work. That's just how it works for me though. I work every day on music.

How do you normally tend to work? At a piano?

Yep, or I just sing things into my phone. Mostly on a piano. I don't play guitar.

Do you have a nice place in your home to work?

I tried. I have a house in Las Vegas and it used to be Andre Agassi's house, so it's got this cool/weird heritage. His old massage room had a weird spa vibe to it. We gutted it and made it this all-wood vibe and put a piano in there. This was going to be my spot. I can see some grass and some trees and it's supposed to check all the boxes, you know? A perfect room to make music.

We've been there for six years, and I have yet to have shit happen in that room. Nothing. I don't know, maybe it's just my brain. I've had more happen for me creatively at the piano in the kids' room. There is an old upright that was just there for me to tinker with and for my kids to get lessons on. I had more good things happen on that piano with the TV going than I've had in my fancy "music" room. You never know what your spot's going to be.

Do albums get increasingly more difficult to make as you get older? Or easier?

I hate saying a clichéd thing like this, but I can only say that this new record is the most personal record that I've ever made, for sure, at least as far as the writing is concerned. I know how that sounds. I've come to the point now where I know what it feels like to tell the truth to an audience, and I also know what it feels like to just lie to them. I like telling the truth. I was striving for that on this record. I had to push myself… and it was hard on me.

The very best Killers songs feel kind of big and universal, but they don't necessarily feel very personal.

Yeah, well the holy grail is having it be meaningful to you and maybe be personal, but then having it resonate with everyone. Songs I've written that have done that make me feel the most gratified, I guess, or give me the most pleasure, especially to perform. When you see so many people connecting with it, it's just… you can't beat it.

Success is great, obviously, but it can also play tricks on you. There is this idea, particularly with big bands, that each new record must sell as much, if not more, than the previous one or else it's somehow deemed a failure. That can warp your view of your own creative work.

What you're saying has happened to me almost exactly. It tweaks your brain. You're trying to figure out what you did differently. We know what it feels like to have this certain amount of success and you can't help but want to maintain it, even though I don't even know if that's attainable for a rock band right now. I'm not sure. I'm not using it as an excuse, but I don't know if it's possible anymore. Things are so different. You try to figure out how to get back there. I'm guilty of chasing it a little bit, trying to figure out how to do that every time. We found out pretty quickly that it wasn't right for us, trying to write towards success or recreate something over again. You can't be authentic if you're working that way. We're only willing to go so far to chase a hit.

What is the hallmark of a successful song?

What does it have to do? It's tough. If I'm ranking how successful a song is, at least in my mind, I feel like I write a lot of solid 6's and 7's. I guess when it goes up above there and it sticks around for a while, *that* is when you know that you're onto something.

When I'm on stage I feel like I have to be a salesman, so if I don't believe in a song, it's not going to make it. I won't be able to sell it. That is pretty controversial within our band because there are songs that don't make it that the other guys might like. I have to tell them, "Really, I can't. It's nothing against you," or "I tried it and it just didn't pass the bar, lyrically, that I want to get to. Maybe I didn't come up with a good enough theme or idea. The riff is great, but I didn't do it this time. I'll try again on the next one." But that's it. I get their frustration, but they don't have to sing it.

Do young musicians ask you for advice?

A little, sometimes. It's rare. I'll take a lot of pictures with people and sign things, and every now and then there will be some questions like that. I don't think about that kind of stuff too much, so I'm not always sure what to tell them. "What *not* to put in your band bio" is good advice maybe. I usually just talk about the songs. I tell them that you've got to listen to your heart. Is this song good enough? You really think it's good enough? Is that chorus good enough that you want to show it to people and play it for them? Can you imagine people singing along to that? It's hard, but people need to realize how hard it is. But there's nothing wrong with trying, you know? It's ok to be ambitious. It's ok to want to be good.

Why not try and be the best? Why not try and make the very best thing you can?

I mean, why not? If I made chairs or tables, I would still want them to be the most perfect, most beautiful chairs you could find and the highest possible quality. Why wouldn't we want to do that with songs? Songs are forever.

Recommended by Brandon Flowers:

Have you heard Alex Cameron yet? He's from Australia and has an album called *Jumping the Shark*. I saw something that was posted about him online and he looked cool in the picture, so I clicked on it. I was just so impressed. I kept looking at his videos and listening to more of his songs. Every song on the album is so good. I haven't ever heard a writer quite like him, his lyrics are so good. He's so smart. He has a new record coming out soon, even better than the first one.

From Alex Cameron I was led to Kirin J. Callinan. I think they are buddies. His new album, *Bravado*, is just this weird, bold thing that sounds like something nobody else is doing. I don't know if anyone has ever done anything quite like it.

Hmm. Next up is *Ultra* by Depeche Mode. *Violator* was their big record and then the next one, *Songs of Faith and Devotion*, was huge too, but *Ultra* sort of went under the radar. It has "It's No Good" on it, but the album is kind of unfairly overlooked. When people ask, I'd say that *Ultra* by Depeche Mode is probably my favorite album.

White House Subs in New Jersey. Has everybody heard of this place? I just heard of it in Atlantic City. So I was on an airplane and I was sitting next to this guy and I told him I was going to Atlantic City. He told me I had to go to White House Subs. It was the best Italian sub I've ever had. If you go to Atlantic City, you must. White House Subs.

I'm reading *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann right now. Holy shit. It's not for everybody, but you definitely get taken to the mountain. Strong. Powerful. I'm into it.

Name
Brandon Flowers

Vocation
Musician

Fact

Brandon Flowers is a singer and songwriter in The Killers, a rock band from Las Vegas, Nevada that has sold over 22 million albums since releasing their debut in 2004. The band will release their fifth studio album, *Wonderful Wonderful*, this September. When asked what advice he might have for up and coming musicians, he offered the following: "I tell them that you've got to listen to your heart. Is this song good enough? You really think it's good enough? Is that chorus good enough that you want to show it to people and play for them? Can you imagine people singing along to that? There's nothing wrong with trying, you know? It's OK to be ambitious. It's ok to want to be good."

