

Conor Oberst on the compulsion to create



May 11, 2017 - Singer and songwriter Conor Oberst has made music his entire life. While most well-known for his work with indie rock band Bright Eyes, he has numerous side projects and most recently released *Salutations*, a solo album. Working on his own schedule, Oberst lets his mind wander into new territories to write songs. Music isn't something he can simply turn on or off; it is a life pursuit.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2176 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Anxiety](#).

Do you find that songwriting—and the way that making songs functions in your life—has changed a lot over the years? You’ve been doing this since you were literally a kid.

Well, I suppose the longer I’m on this earth, the more recurring themes I notice. I try really hard not to get jaded or cynical about things, but I think it’s just a fact of growing older that you just start to notice patterns, and a lot of those patterns are upsetting. I approach the songwriting probably the same way I always have. It’s hard to even articulate, but it comes from some unconscious spot in my mind.

It’s usually just one little idea that eventually grows into a song. The mysterious part is that thing you can’t control: that X factor. You can’t predict when it’s going to come and you have no control over it. *That’s* the elusive thing you’re always chasing. Once you have that, it becomes much more of a craft. That’s where I feel like I’ve gotten better over the years because I’ve probably written over 1,000 songs or whatever.

I can’t pretend that part—the crafting part—is really mysterious anymore. That part is what I do. That’s my job. If you’re a carpenter, you know that you can build a cabinet. I know I can make a song once I have the initial thing, the spark. It’s just the initial thing that you can’t force. That’s the part you have to wait for, basically.

If you can’t force that spark to happen, is it about creating opportunities where it might show up?

I definitely think there’s something to be said for making time for me to be by myself and free of any kind of distraction or obligation. It’s almost like penciling in time to daydream, essentially. Time to stare out a window or walk around aimlessly, you know? That’s usually when the ideas happen. If someone hands me a guitar and is like, “Go sit in this room for 20 minutes,” nothing will happen. If I’m free to wander both physically and in my thoughts, then—not always, but a lot of times—something strikes a chord and I can build on it; an initial observation or idea or little scrap of memory seems to stick and has some resonance and I can go from there.

There are always peaks and valleys in anyone’s professional career and you’ve certainly weathered a few of them. Did any of that outside stuff, the actual business of music, ever get in the way of your creative life?

Oh yeah. There have been moments of total emotional devastation. It’s essentially wishing you weren’t alive or wishing you didn’t have the life you have, wishing you were a different person. Like for me to wish I never made music is crazy because that’s literally *all* I’ve done my whole life, you know? I don’t know how to do anything else.

It’s a strange thing, but, yeah, there have been a couple times when I’ve gotten that low emotionally, psychologically, where I was having those thoughts, but you just kind of have to beat them back and realize that

everyone has those moments. No matter what you do, it's *your* life. You're going to have moments where you question what you're doing or you experience a level of turmoil or tragedy that calls into question, "Oh, I could have had some other totally different life, but instead I did this." You have to be able to separate your professional life from your identity as a human being.

The other thing I always think about is that—with the exception of my family and a couple of really old friends—pretty much *everyone* I love in my life, I've met somehow through music. That's always good to keep in mind. The connective tissue of my life is how music has led me to all these different people. If I had never played music who knows if I would have met all the people that populate my world and that I love so much.

At this point, how do you define success?

It's getting stranger for me, not just for me but for everyone in the music business. There used to be a more objective measurable things: *How many records did you sell? What magazines were you in? What TV shows are you doing?*

These days it just seems like there's so much to compete with. So much more information and entertainment, it's like a full-on blast all the time. For a guy like me, I'm never going to be trending on Google or something. I'm going to always be lost in the wave of all this other stuff that's happening. I'm no longer new. You realize that you can't compete with newness. It's only going to be when a certain type of person that has a certain type of personality is going to somehow discover my music and seek me out and learn about my catalog or come see me play or whatever. I guess there are little things I can do to kind of wave my hand in a big crowd like, "Hey, I'm over here." Things like doing this interview, for example. At the end of the day it's kind of up to people to find me, because I can't spend a lot of time trying to draw attention to myself. Self-promotion is a job unto itself and one that, after a certain point, I don't have much interest in. No one is going to put me on *Ellen* or *Saturday Night Live*. I'm not going to be on the cover of *Time*. People are not going to find out what's up with me unless they look for it, which is kind of cool because it means that the people that do look for it have some vested interest in it. It's not being forced into them by any means, that's for sure. As those old markers of success become more blurry, you really do increasingly define success by doing things that make you happy. That other stuff falls away.

How important do you think it is for you to have a life that's separate from touring or making music, some way to nourish your creative self outside of the business of music stuff?

It doesn't happen that often, but sometimes I've taken extended periods off, maybe at the most nine months, of not really doing shows. I think that's healthy for sure. I feel like I'm kind of obsessive with music and I wish I could be that into something else. I wish I could be like, "Oh, I love birdwatching," or throw myself into some unrelated hobby. I really don't have that. Music is not something I can turn off and on. Of course, I love my friends and I love my family and I love people, but outside of that it's like a constant thing that I feel like I have to basically be writing as much as I can as often as I can, because it's like the one thing that has been the constant in my life that provides me meaning and purpose. It's like a vocation. It's not like a career. It's like a life pursuit. I *have* to do it because that's what I do.

Sadly, I've experienced many times, when it comes to relationships and stuff, that if you choose to give yourself completely on a vocational level to some sort of creative pursuit, it does usually have to supersede everything else. That does come at a price, you know? But I feel like that's what I want to do. That's what I'm going to do. Of course, it's nice to take breaks, go on vacation, distract yourself, or forget about it for a second, I think that is normal and healthy, but I couldn't give it up if I wanted to. Music is who I am, so it's not really up for discussion.

As far as songwriting goes, do you have ways to trick yourself out of feeling stuck?

Definitely. For me it's always come in waves. I'll have a real barren period as far as writing, and then I'll hit on something and I'll write a LOT of songs in a somewhat short period of time. Once the writing wave goes by there's always a little bit of panic of like, "Oh, it's never going to happen again!" but I've had that panic now

so many times in my life that it's like, "Yeah, it's going to happen again." You need to be patient and you need to create that mental space or whatever that just allows you to think freely. For me, I need to not be living in the details or stuck somehow in the mundane parts of my life, but to let my mind wander into other territories. I feel like when I can create that space for myself something usually happens.

People are fascinated with the idea of knowing about other people's creative practice, as if there is a secret code or key for how things get made. It's often both liberating and terrifying to acknowledge that there's no one way for anybody to make things. No right answer.

Exactly. That's the thing. I think that's the main takeaway from conversations like this—that everybody's creative process is different. For example, I know that Carole King showed up to the same building for years and wrote one beautiful song after another while on the clock, but I'm not Carole King. That wouldn't work for me. I would never get a job like that. But, hey, she made it work that way. And those songs are classics. It's not like she just mailed them in. That's just how she worked and that's probably how she learned to do it.

You've written hundreds of songs at this point in your life, do you think of songs as being things that are ever really finished?

If I've played a song for a long time live, I tend to change words or I'll change the melody or change the arrangements based off whatever the touring band is. In that sense, they're never complete, never finished. I've said this before, but I feel like songs exist in all of these different forms. You have the document—the recording—which people know, but even that gets blurred because often there's a bunch of live recordings, covers, or revisions floating around. There can be more than one document.

Sometimes a song will truly just get put to bed forever, where it never gets played and it doesn't matter. Sometimes it's a song that has legs and keeps getting played all the time, and then it's always going to be morphing into a different version of itself, I think, without even trying to. I think you have to try harder to not let that happen. I've heard bands that are like, "Every time we play this song it's gotta sound like this. It's got to sound like the record." I feel like there are bands that do that or approach it like that, but I could never do that. I want it to be different. Thank God that it changes, because who wants to do the same thing all the time? The most fun part about playing live music is the weird different stuff that can happen any given day.

Is making music a process of trying to get out of your own way? Opening a clear channel to communicate?

Totally. I think it's important to not feel like your creative output is being controlled by a timeline that is organized by someone else. I've never had some high powered manager chomping on a cigar or a record label guy on my case, know what I mean? I've never had anyone saying to me, "Where's the record, Conor? Where's the single?" But I feel like I have that guy inside my own head that terrorizes me on my own behalf. A voice that says, "What are you doing? You're wasting your time." It's really just me tripping myself out. If I can get rid of that thing that's feeling obligatory and go back to a more open channel like, "I'm here. Let's go." That's really the place to be, I think, as far as writing goes for me.

I know a lot of people who are like, "It's a discipline. Nine o'clock every day I'm at the desk." To me it's not that at all. I don't have any discipline. I just know that I have to wait and eventually it will happen. I know that I have to be patient.

Recommended by Conor Oberst:

BOOK: "Only Love Can Bring You Peace" by Simon Joyner

TV SHOW: The Man In The High Castle

PLACE: The Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa OK

ARTIST: Lui Stini

ALBUM: Life In The Dark by The Felice Brothers

Name

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Vocation

Musician

Fact

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Tony Bonacci