

Dan Bejar on having no process



November 20, 2017 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2218 words.

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

There's a quote from you: "I'm lazy. I have no work ethic. Music just descends on me. The song kind of wafts by and I walk into it." It's a nice way to describe the mystery of the creative process. Though, for someone who's recorded well over 20 albums over the past two decades, you do seem to have a fairly strong work ethic.

Maybe I do. I think I write more than a lot of people without actually realizing it. My mind is always blown when people take six or seven years between albums. I'm just like, "Woah, what do you do with your time?" [laughs]

I think I do have a work ethic when it comes to being in the studio, because to me the music part of things—coming up with a song, coming up with a bunch of words that truss together nicely and have some kind of melodic phrase that feels natural and memorable—has always seemed more mysterious and not like work somehow. But the studio is like a battle. The studio is like a war.

Records certainly haven't gotten easier to make over time. I think about writers who are kind of like poets, people who will sit down and write endlessly and then overwrite and whittle things down and edit and edit, basically carving away at ideas in an attempt to get to what is essential in their words. I think of people I'm really dazzled by, Nick Cave or Leonard Cohen. I wish I would work in the way that I imagine they do, but it's still very mysterious to me. When something is really foreign to you I think you tend to romanticize it or you aspire to it in a kind of hopeless way.

If I think about it too much I start to question what I'm coming up with and when I sit down to write I don't even really know how to do that. I wouldn't say I necessarily stumble blindly into things, but I like the song idea to present itself to me in some kind of natural way before I start working or before I start to attack something with my mind.

You're known for wry, erudite lyrics. Do your lyrics evolve in tandem with your music?

They have to happen together, you know? Maybe at some point I'll go back to the old way, which is writing constantly in a book and playing guitar constantly and then grabbing what I would call "melodious language" or language that seems like it wants to be sung and then sticking it into a song. It hasn't really been like that for a few years now. It's been more just like stringing singable thoughts together. There's no real middle ground. Once in a while I'll write something that seems completely divorced from music, but I won't think about it in terms of something to look at and think, "Oh, I wonder if this could go in a song." It just seems like prose.

Do you have a writing practice that's separate from music making? Is that something that interests you?

I don't know. I came late to making music, while writing was something that I'd done from a younger age. I always thought of writing as more in keeping with what kind of person I was. Even through the making of many Destroyer records, I still thought at some point I had a book in me. And then after about 20 years, I'm not sure when it was exactly, I came to terms with that notion possibly not being true. I turned 40 and I just kind of woke up to the idea that, "It's possible you're just a rock and roll singer with some kind of flair." I have a hard time speaking in a way that seems real to me otherwise. When I sit down to write something, there's a certain amount of anxiety if I think it's supposed to be a work of literature or something like that. But for some reason, if it's supposed to sound like The Doors, then I can really bust loose and be myself.

It's a fairly natural thing for people to formulate an idea of who you are as a person based on your body of work—to assume, for example, that the "I" in the songs is always really you. That being said, the narratives in your songs are slippery. They often deflect that sort of interpretation.

Singing is a physical thing. For me it feels really natural to think that when someone is singing something, and you're looking at them, you're getting an idea of who they really are. It is my voice coming out of my body, it's a physical product of me. You know, to say someone has an ugly voice is like a real material damnation. It's not like saying that they said something ugly, or that they're mean. It's like they are, in some ways, kind of a monster. There's something hideous to behold about them.

I'm curious how your work changes—or the experience of playing rock music changes—as you get older. I'm reminded of this other quote from you that seems appropriate here: "Pop culture is ageist. If you're a singer or a dancer or an actor and you get to your 40's, you're fucked—and 99% of me thinks it serves people right for getting into showbiz in the first place."

[laughs] Well, I think when I said that 40s thing, I was thinking about show business. Singers, dancers, actors, people whose bodies are part of what they do. Maybe it's like athletes or something, I don't know, but it just changes. I think it's always been like that. It's just that when you think of something as art, it's weird. You shouldn't age out of being an artist. It's strange that half of someone's life isn't really supposed to be addressed, because you're not really privy to the rock and roll spirit anymore. [laughs] But that's not how it works. It's not. You're just dead to it.

Don't get me wrong, though. I think everybody, well I don't know about everybody, but I think almost across the board, all singers get better as they get older. At least that seems to be true about the singers I like. Maybe it would also be true about singers I don't like, but maybe they just disappear or something, I don't know.

Has the experience of touring and playing live—whether it's by yourself or with a band behind you—changed radically over the years as you get older?

It used to feel more like a cool drunken frolic, and it's become more anxiety ridden or confusing to me, or just more obviously self-conscious. The thing that most people dig when they're younger is just to get up on stage and go for it. I used to have to drink for two days just to get on stage, and then drink for another two days after I got off to be able to deal with how shitty I thought it was. I don't advise that as a coping mechanism.

I think I'm just a slow learner. I needed to get literally one thousand shows under my belt before I started to relax and feel good and confident on a stage. I'm kind of into it these days, you know? I still often crave the rope ladder to come down five minutes before the show that I can just shuffle up and a helicopter takes me away, or a rescue SWAT team that busts down the door in order to get me away from the stage. I still have that dream, but once I'm up there it's good. In fact, the performing part is now the part of touring that I like. It's just now all the other stuff around it which kind of sucks. I also like the band that has been Destroyer live for the past five years. I really like the way they play. They just sort of whip up the noise, you know? That part adds a certain confidence.

Between your work in Destroyer and in The New Pornographers, you collaborate with a lot of really talented musicians. What do you like about collaboration as opposed to working solo, which you could easily do?

People sometimes think that Destroyer is all me and only me, but it's not in the least. For the last few years, the bulk have my job has been to find a grouping of people who do something cool when they're together in a room. Maybe in the mixing process I have more of a say or if there's some sort of yes or no decision that has to be made it ends up on me, but on the musical side it's always been really collaborative, both in the studio and on stage.

I just like musicians. I also like surprise. I'm a glutton for novelty. They do so many things that I can't do. That's one of the reasons maybe why the Destroyer records jump around a lot, why there is something dilettante-ish about it. There's a lot of really good things in music that I like, none of which I can achieve by myself. I also love the way good

musicians just go off on their instrument. It would be so boring if it were just me.

As someone who can't just pick up any random instrument and express themselves through it in real time, I get overly excited by that shit and I want to record it. I like to surround myself in it. Making this last record, ken was kind of strenuous in some ways, because it was a conscious exercise to get as close to minimalism as Destroyer is probably ever gonna get. My tendency generally skews towards having as much stuff happening as possible at all times.

Are you someone who feels the compulsion to work on music all the time? When you have time off, do you have a compulsive music-making practice?

No way. My process is no process. My process is letting things fester in my mind. I might make little notes or scribbles in the van, but I have let those things build into a critical mass until I address it and say, "I wonder if there's a record here?" Maybe it would be good if I just forced myself to do some kind of music on a regular basis instead of choosing these strained, isolated projects.

My time off is weird—or not weird at all, perhaps—because it looks any other person's, really. Some kind of domestic scene. I make my daughter's lunch or something like that. It's basic forties stuff. The split between my personal life and my "artist" life is very, very cut and dried. I'm just kinda leading the family life or I'm living for two or three months in a bus driving through the night and living in bars. There's not too much in between. I do kind of relax a little bit when I'm not working on music or not touring. I go on reading jags. As opposed to when I'm doing music stuff, then I'm kind of generally ill at ease and I seize up and I can't read, which is weird but true. I start to have weird sensations that I can dwell on more and more until maybe they seep into an idea for a song or a record.

I find the idea of "creative practices" so fascinating. When I hear about people that keep a rigorous schedule or follow a strict set of rituals in order to get certain things done on a regular basis, I'm totally fascinated because for me the process feels so formless. It's so much drift, but not in a cool bohemian way, either. It's just formlessness. It's weird. It works for me, but it's weird.

Do reviews or outside feedback affect what you make in any way? Your work elicits such interesting reactions and comparisons.

Not really, not too much. It's mostly funny to me. You know, people saying I sound like Al Stewart when I'm trying to sound like Neil Tennant from the Pet Shop Boys. It's usually just a pretty classic indicator of what I think I'm doing versus what I'm actually doing. There's always been a pretty amazing disconnect between the two—what I think I'm doing versus how it comes across. I have always felt like that divide—that gulf—was bigger for me than it was for most people. I'd think to myself, "Most people can't be that far off the mark with what they do, can they?" In the end, what can you do? As long as in my mind I think I'm making something amazing, that's all that matters I guess.

Five classic records featuring Dan Bejar:

Destroyer - ken (2017)

The New Pornographers - Twin Cinema (2005)

Swan Lake - Beast Moans (2006)

Hello, Blue Roses - WZO (2015)

Destroyer - Kaputt (2011)

Name

Dan Bejar

Vocation

Musician





Photo by Ted Bois