

On finding the moment that shifts your entire perspective



DJ, producer, and saxophonist Justin Tam (Tzekin) discusses embracing the beauty in devastation, letting ideas crash into each other, and finding a way back to simplicity when life insists on complication

March 14, 2025 -

As told to Pola Pucheta, 1641 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Mental health](#), [Adversity](#).

What kind of energy do you think has been coming your way lately in life?

It's been a moment of letting everything into my life as much as I can, whether that's friendship, conversations, ideas, or people who want to make stuff together. I think when you're making something, you can get so caught up in doing something in a small space by yourself and forget that the beauty of creating something is with others.

What creative path has led you where you are today?

A lot of it is this feeling of needing to say something and not having the words for it—not having the sound for it—and trying to find a way to say it. My mom is a violinist. So [initially], learning music was so instructional, based on scores. The thing that really got me was jazz and improvising, thinking about how we can create something out of nothing. I only ever started DJing because someone asked me to, because they heard my music on Soundcloud. It was a fucking [Chet Faker](#) show, when he was playing to a room of twenty people at the Oxford Art Factory. I was sixteen and I was playing on CDs that I burnt on a PC.

The last time I went to Sydney was really [something] for me. There was a bunch of us who've known each other for ten to fifteen years [playing in] this band called [Worlds Only](#). We got together and played a show at Phoenix in Sydney, which is a private concert hall that was turned into a public performance space. That was the most formative thing for me—to go back to a place I thought had nothing, a city where I thought there was no sound. To come together with these people who I admire, who I trust, who I've known for so many years, and make something together. That is the highlight reel to me. Fuck music school. Fuck art degrees. For me, it's just about making stuff with people.

How do you know when it's the right time to put down or pick up a certain project, creative persona, or collaborator?

It has to be really natural and really comfortable. That moment has to be led by [our] lives, because the songs will come from life anyway. I'm not about to get into a studio with someone and write a song. For me, that just doesn't feel right. I could be driving or sitting around, or listening to something, and then I have an idea. In a way, that's the only thing I know how to follow. It's also about work. What is the nature of work? Why do we think about music as work? Why do we think about art as work? Our idea of work is so twisted anyway. It's like, we're here to make money and to die? Surely, there's more than that. That's not what I want music to be. I want music to be pleasure. I want music to be spontaneous and unpredictable and unknowable.

How do you think you became someone who was driven by suffering to someone who's driven by pleasure? How or why does that happen?

Culturally, I was brought up with a lot of ideas about suffering and having to work to prove that you should exist. In Chinese culture, there's a really deep idea of suffering, everyone has this deep resentment that they respond to. There is a religious element [too], all my family are Christian, and they are really invested in this idea of proving themselves as the perfect selves to become something for eternity. I think it's an amazing idea, but also not relevant to how I live my life. I'm more interested in pleasure now than in eternity. I would rather have a good time tonight than a good time forever. What more do we have? I think we've been tricked into thinking that we could live a life that could be bigger or better than the one we have right now. The idea that we could get a better job, or do more, or achieve more. All I have is what I have now. I think in general, people have lost sight of simplicity in life. It's even commercialized. You know, like, Marie Kondo, feng shui your living room so your three thousand dollar couch can get breathing space. All this shit is ancient knowledge and ancient ways of living. I think to lose that to commercialization is really ugly. I want to live by that more.

Can we talk about car crashes? It's a present theme in your album Skyline Death, it's in your Letterboxd top four, it's in your mixes. What is it about something with imminent impact that pulls you in?

I was in a really big car crash when I moved out of my parent's house. I remember I was listening to a CD by The-Dream. It was the most romantic, most traumatizing moment in my life. The CD was stuck, and I remember sitting there and trying to take it out of the wreckage- thinking that it needed to be the one thing I rescued and it wouldn't come out. That was really romantic, because it was something so sudden and unpredictable and severe. It's something that completely changes your life, something that completely changes your way of thinking-your way of being. I find that really attractive. I think we all have moments like that in our lives. We have a car crash, something explodes, something tears apart, something breaks. You have a breakup. You lose something. You lose someone. It's these pivotal, cataclysmic moments that change our lives. That's what I love, finding something beautiful in something so devastating.

Can you talk about a time in your creative life when two unstoppable forces met, or boundaries dissolved in some way? How did it shift your perspective about making art?

I think collaborating with anyone is a car crash. A really beautiful car crash. And I love this because it feels like a game of chicken. You're driving and you drive towards each other and you have to turn off at the last moment. It feels like that. Your ideas collide. It's up to you whether you choose to stare them in the eyes and drive forward, or turn away.

And there's also the moment of suspension right before a collision, where things feel heightened or slowed down. What is there to learn in those moments about possibility, intuition or risk?

To make music with someone else is always a risk, because to explore something emotionally with someone else is a risk.

Can you tell me about a moment of friction in your personal or professional life that led to some kind of breakthrough? How did you navigate that?

I mean, I have so much to say about my personal relationship with my ex of five years. She put out a book on Wendy's Subway, go buy it. It was a moment of friction to be in an intimate relationship with someone who was so invested in creating something in their own life, and for that to exist at the same time as [our] personal lives. It's the simple things in the way you live your life every day, the way you go to shops, the way you are at home. The way you are at home is the most intimate, most private space. You're sharing something intimate and something creative at the same time. In a way [I learned] the version of myself that creates stuff is really different to the person with myself that exists day to day.

You become a different person?

It's just the part of myself that I can't express in those moments. I don't know how, I don't know what words to use, I don't know the language—but I know how it sounds. I sent a song to my therapist recently, and I was like, "There's a lot in here that I don't know how to tell you, but if you listen to it, you might get it." And she just wrote back, "Oh, yeah, very evocative." I thought her response was a bit neutral, but I think that was the point as well. I sent her what I thought was the most emotional thing I could.

Do you think of yourself as intense? It's something that shows up in the work often—something sharp, something angular. What do you make of harshness as a creative offering?

It's the car crash again. For me, I want to be shocked by something. I want my whole worldview to be shifted by one explosive moment. I really love that, and I love to live like that as well. I want to trust that the honest thing that I share with someone isn't offensive, it doesn't feel like an attack. I want to feel like the person I'm sharing with wants to work through things as well. I want to be able to have that moment where I can clash with someone, realize it doesn't work, and figure out a new way to do it. Have you run out of things to say?

I have a few more questions, but I'll try to make the last ones more fun.

I'm fun.

You are fun. What is something that you wish more people would ask you about?

Music. I wish more people would say "I have this cool song I want to show to you." I wish people would be less gatekeep-y with music.

Justin Tam recommends

Swimming in the ocean

Solo karaoke

Going to the afters with people you meet in the club

DJ Treasure mixes

Single's Inferno

Name

Justin Tam

Vocation

DJ, producer, saxophonist

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