

On finding inspiration in scrap



Devo frontman and composer Mark Mothersbaugh details how gaining and then losing his sight changed his artistic outlook, the misanthropic potential of the beats, and his collection of square dance vinyl.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 3878 words.

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You seem like someone who is very intentional about your art. Were you a part of every bit of the process for your new book, down to the materials and overall design?

I make books, but I only make them one at a time. I use this online company called [Blurb](#). I put together books of different sizes with artwork that I do, and I make one for me or I make two and then I give one to somebody that wants one. And I've done that for years when I get stuck or just need a break when I'm writing music. Anyhow, John came to the building and saw the book that I was working on and goes, "Oh, I want to put that out." And I go, "No, you don't. I just make them for me with Blurb."

I mean, I think Blurb's genius. They're allowing people that normally would never put out a book, like grandmas and grandpas, to put together books. My kids put out their books at Valentine's Day a few years ago when they were just in junior high. They made one for our family. I think those books are going to be worth a lot of money someday. People will say, "Oh, this was a whole other way to think about books." Books are like an endangered species, books as we know them, because the internet and cell phones and things have eliminated a lot of that stuff. And a lot of that's good. There's a lot of good in that because you only have so much paper.

The barrier to entry has changed much the way it has for music. Though I suppose when it comes to a book, the audience and ability to quickly make an impact for a book is much more difficult, and you essentially need to be your own PR.

There are a lot of impediments to bring out a book!

But I like what you're saying in that there shouldn't be. That's why I love zines and alt weeklies, which just keep disappearing. Just like with vinyl, people still want that physicality.

Yes. I don't want the physical piece of every single piece of music I've ever heard. I don't want to have that much stuff, nor does anybody. Maybe a few people need that, and go for it. They should be allowed to do it. I think curations are great and they're good to acknowledge, but I don't think everybody needs everything. This guy saw my book I was just going to make for myself, and he said, "Let me put it out." And I go, "You might lose money doing this." He goes, "No, we'll be careful about it and we won't make that many." Which is true, we didn't. I think we made 1,500 copies.

It's so incredible that when you feel like a break from creating, you just create another type of art. You don't stop yourself from creating. How do you keep that energy?

I was either fortunate enough or unfortunate enough that I was seven years old when they discovered I was blind, and I walked to school for two years not being able to see further than six inches from my face. There was just enough of a blur of color and blobs that I would know that I was getting close to a street corner and I'd feel it when you stepped down and I made it across and didn't get flattened by a car.

The day that I got a pair of glasses, it was extreme myopia. It was like everything came into focus for the first time in my life. I didn't have that when I was a baby, where your eyes slowly start to focus and everything. I just had it, bang, and it just happened at once and it was a joyous moment for me. The downside is that the glasses in those days, the prescription was so extreme, they looked like the bottoms of Coke bottles. I saw everything... You know when you look in an orb, like a Christmas ornament or a doorknob or something and everything was... What do they call that...

Like a fisheye?

Yes, like a fisheye lens. So it meant there were a lot of things I couldn't be part of, like sports. But the joy of getting to see things... I spent seven years where I would lay close to stuff. I'd be on the lawn and I could see little bugs. If they were this close to me, I could watch ants climb on leaves of grass. They'd crawl on me and I could see things if they were *this* close. I think that handicap of not having vision made my mind always look at things and try to create a shape. If somebody knocked on the door and I was in the living room, I could look over at the direction where I knew a door was, but it wasn't until they came in and I heard their voice that I would run up to them and I'd be like *this* close. I'd go, "Grandma!" And grandma would go, "Okay, you're a freak." But my mind would make things.

I think that's why I never really liked LSD. Somebody dropped on me a couple times. I never took it on purpose. Two different people thought they were helping me out. I think my mind already kind of created the visions people saw. Just in my dreams and just getting up and looking for my glasses in the morning, I would see things, my mind would create things. So it was too intense for me.

A lot of things that inspire me are just scraps of information. My mom and dad, we'd go downtown at Christmas time in Akron, Ohio, and we'd walk along, there'd be a homeless person speaking, and I'd want to stop and listen to them. "Wow, they know something that we all need to know." They've altered their life. He's doing something else and he's trying to warn people. I knew that there were things that were out there that people couldn't see. And I thought, "Well, maybe they were right in front of you and you didn't see them." I thought maybe there's things you hear and you don't even know it. So that's the kind of stuff that intrigued me.

I decided that I was going to keep track of that kind of stuff. So at a very early age, I started making cards. It started off with postcards and blank paper, and then I started prepping the cards. This book that we're talking about here is atypical in the sense that it's a collection of 500 images that started with an eye that was made out of plaster that I found in downtown LA, somewhere between '77 and '79. When I came out to California, Mexican botanicas had me interested and mesmerized because I felt like they were supplying a part of the world that science wasn't supplying, society wasn't supplying. They were in an area that I was really interested in, which was where faith and science start mixing together. I thought they represented important parts of what it means to be a human. So anyhow, I collected this eye and you put it over your doorway to ward off evil spirits and to ward off bad energy from people that were maybe thinking bad thoughts about you, evildoers that had it in for you for some reason.

But it's so symbolic for you as well, having started out without your vision.

Ironically, I lost vision in one of my eyes about four years ago at the very beginning of COVID. I went into an ICU back before that. They didn't have any medicine yet to treat people, they were panicking. They just put everybody on ventilators. So I think going on a ventilator, it either popped my eye or somebody hit me when they were sending me in this chaotic situation. But the first couple days I was in ICU, I lost vision in one of my eyes. And they were saying, "Well, maybe it's the COVID," which we now know had nothing to do with it other than it was my reason for being at ICU. But it's kind of interesting in a way because I have, in this eye now, a permanent version of what I had for the first 69 years of my life, which was taking off my glasses and everything

being blurred. Now glasses can't correct it. If I close this eye, I have this blurred eye that has about as much vision, or even maybe a little less, than what I had for the first seven years of my childhood.

They say when you take a sense away, everything else picks up.

Here's my feeling about being a cyclops: it has some irritating problems with it. I'm sure my left eye was my subordinate. Now it's got to step up to the plate and do everything.

We're so sorry, left eye.

So my left eye at the end of the day is like, "I'm tired." It really wants me to give it a rest earlier than normal. I don't feel like 18 hour days are that great for me and I need a little bit more time. But on the other hand, I think stereo is overrated. I spent 69 years with stereo vision, and now I've been a cyclops for four years. I'll trip on a stairway or something. I have to be more careful than I used to. A little intentional. I have a daughter that lost her vision in one eye when she was one or two. Her eyes were over-inflating with fluid. She had glaucoma. And it was cute because when I came back from the hospital, she was watching me kind of shaky and pouring coffee on the table. And she goes, "Dad, let me show you something," and she showed me how you touch the coffee cup with your little finger before you pour, then you don't pour it on the table. We've bonded over that. My family, two of us out of four are cyclops. But for the most part, yeah, it just gives you something else to add to the way you think about your art you're doing.

Did you have any habits or processes that have had to change as your life has changed?

I don't write music every day. I write music five days a week approximately. But visual art I do every single day of my life. If something happens where I go to bed and I forgot to work on one of these cards, and I go, "Oh, I only have this little piece here and this here," I'll wake up in the middle of the night and I'll finish it because I have that obsession that I need to keep that journal. It's like a journal for me, doing artwork on cards. I really liked the book because it's much more focused. These cards are things I heard during the day, or I get a thought in my head and I don't want to lose it.

You leave space for it, which is so nice, but don't then obsess over finality. Your note with the book said that you were open to people cutting pages up and being able to collage with it. People are so precious about their art and you seem to have the opposite approach here.

My art is very personal, but I understand that people are going to open this book up and they're going to read the line over top of this eyebrow that says "filthy esophagus," and then right below it says "lift your leg." And they're going to go, "How do those..." It's not going to mean anything to them. Moving on to the next word in the title beatnik, I think of it as beat poetry and stream of consciousness. I'm fascinated with artists. The beatniks to me were the first generation post-atomic bomb that we're saying, "You know what? Humans might not be good for this planet." And they were critical of humans. I identify with that because I have feelings similar to them, I'm sure. So with the text in this, you skip a couple pages and then you find something else that it relates to from another day and from another situation. And I could see building poems from it, and I have done it... I've built lyrics out of these phrases. I mean, in this book even there's a QR code, and if you click on it, you can hear a song that I wrote that uses lyrics made from this book.

I remember listening to you on a podcast where you talked about breaking your sister and brother's records.

Oh yeah, yeah. Now that you're saying that... Yeah, when I was a kid, I was kind of a jerk, and my sister bought records that I didn't respect. At the time I didn't care. I liked the Bee Gees' first singles, when they had 45s when I was 12. But when I got to be 15, I was not into them anymore. My sister had this album and we didn't treat our records well at our house because there were kids ranging from me at 15 down to five years old. So there were all these ages and everybody used the record player, and they weren't precious with whether they went back into the sleeve, where they were put. And we were terrible with handling stuff. Because of it, a lot of records got destroyed, broken, bent, scratched. I was playing one of my sister's records with a Bee Gees song on it when I was 14 or 15, and I just heard, "There's a time, there's a time, there's a time." And I remember, I was like,

"Wow, I like that. It's a tempo." And it used real music, but it was a deconstruction of something that to me was not that interesting a song until I heard just a second and a half of it repeating. I didn't have the technology back in those days to record that, because if I would've, I would've written music over top of that. And I did kind of jam with records that I scratched and broke. But it was the same thing where I had a partial phrase that I felt was stronger than where it originated from.

You were creating your own mosaic. Devo was similarly revolutionary because you were creating sounds and songs in a way that nobody else was.

We were trying for that.

You were in a different world. And I love that you've brought that into the art that you do and the scoring that you do. It makes sense that you hear things that other people don't hear.

I thought it was related to vision problems, and now I have hearing problems, so I hear things that aren't real. I did this book partly because of somebody who had seen me, for 20-some years every day, draw on these cards, and they knew I had a storage container that had 700 volumes of these-volumes that had 100 cards each in them. So they knew I had 70,000 of these cards in a storage container that I thought were only ever opened by me. Nobody else was interested in it. I would just go in and look at it myself. But I started this book because I thought this person said to me, "Well, those cards, that's not art." It was only after I'd been working on it for six months or something that I told them what they'd said to me and they go, "I would never say that." I had heard it wrong.

Seeing how open and available you can make yourself for your own art, it seems like you have a proper process. You make time for your music. You make time for your art every day. It's become a discipline for you.

It took a while. Being an artist, there's also the other side of it. We're in a capitalistic society where you still have to pay your rent even if you're an artist. And if you're making music all day, you still have to eat food, and you still have to make it from one part of town to another somehow, and it takes money. I was lucky enough that I found a way to have a day job that I really like, and it allows me to do the things that I want to do as an artist. I can't do that full time. If I stopped doing music for films and TV shows and for video games... I've heard other people say, "Well, I don't know if writing music for a film is art or not." And a lot of films it's not, I'm sure. A lot of them, it's just a craft. But it's like you do films with artists. I did all the early films for Wes Anderson, for instance. For those and other projects I've worked on, I've just felt like, "Yeah, we are making art." And at the end of the day, if they don't make money, then they don't hire you again.

You also have a specific way of working. They're not just hiring anyone. You have an iconic style and decades of experience, but you're still coming with such a fresh perspective, which I think is not usual.

Yeah, it's not always. There are a lot of really talented composers out there. I sometimes hear things even on just a crappy TV show or something, not even a good show, but I'm listening to the music and I go, "Oh, I like whoever that was, what they did." And quite often it drives you crazy because you watch a movie and something's bothering me, and I'm like, "Oh, you know what it is? I know what they temped that movie with." They temped it with something out of a Danny Elfman or a Hans Zimmer movie, and then they made the composer kind of do a dumbed down version, trying to copy it. So they did the B version of it. So it's not as good as the thing that they were trying to copy.

You're like a craftsman. It's adding something and you're supporting somebody else's ideas, and sometimes people come to you and they need you to help them see their movie, and sometimes they don't know what they're doing and they give you bad advice. And luckily in music, it's so abstract an art form. You come in and they can ask for something and you can leave the meeting going, "They don't know what they need to make this great." And then you forget what they say, you write it, and then when you bring it back, you go, "Well, I listened to what you said and here's what you get." And they're like, "Oh, that's what I asked for? Oh, okay."

Are you making music for yourself, then, in a sense?

Not every day, but almost every day. What I used to do for 30 years, I would come into this building and I would come in at 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning, and I would just write music for myself until everybody showed up at 9:30. And I have hundreds of pieces of music that are all different genres. Like the song in this book, it's a square dance. But I'll tell you, everybody has collections. They have things they collect. Some people collect thimbles, some people collect toothpicks. I know somebody who collects toothpicks, and they're really into the ones that look like they've got a little bit of the bark on the outside. Or they like them if they're die-cut out of something. There are some good ones in the US but there's more interesting toothpicks in Asia, for instance, than there are in the US. I collect vinyl. You might collect songs that meant a lot to you when you were a kid, but I have a vinyl collection that's about 2,000 discs, and it's all 45s of square dance music. Why would you collect that? Because there's such bad karma attached to square dance music anyhow.

What I like about it was that on one side, you got a caller going, "Well, swing your partner round and round, grab your boots and throw them in the air." And people would go to their friend's house or they'd go to their church and they'd play the record with the song on it, and they'd all do the dance. The other side of the record, on almost every square dance record, they were designed so... Square dances not only have the people that do the dance with their checkerboard dresses and their little bolo ties, all that horrible stuff, there's also a guy that's the caller, like a DJ, a guy or a girl that tells you what to do. They have a lot to do with making up what the dance is, and depending upon who's in the dance, you can say one thing on one side of the record, but on the other side you can kind of pull it back a little so that your people in Chattanooga, Tennessee, can all do that dance. But because it's got no lyrics, I took phrases out of this book, for instance, and I've done this with square dance music for nine or 10 years now, and I make up a beatnik poem. And then I play this record that was recorded in the '60s and add synth over top of it, and I may edit it to open a space up where I could go totally electronic or something and come back into it.

About seven or eight years ago I did a tour of a retrospective of my visual art and some of the audio art mixed in that was all non-Devo, and it wasn't about other people's movies or any of that stuff. It toured museums around the US, and when we got to Cincinnati, the people at the museum found square dancers that were 90 years old and they had those outfits I was telling you about. At the premier for the show, they had these 90-year-old people and the guy doing the calls and they were dancing to my beatnik square dancing.

That must have been incredible to see.

Yeah, there's the doctors and dentists that normally show up at a museum, but then there's also Devo fans in Devo shirts going, "What the fuck is this?" I enjoyed it so much.

Mark Mothersbaugh recommends:

Fiery Ramen in Kyoto: Watch out for your eyebrows!

Birdy Magazine: I like their funky style

Stupido-Shop Record Store, Helsinki, Finland

Footwear: 810s HOSP/Black (Moonstar)

Ambient Machine by Yuri Suzuki

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Brent Broza

