

Future Islands on not being an overnight success



June 12, 2017 - Future Islands is a synth-pop band from Baltimore comprised of Gerrit Welmers, William Cashion, and Samuel Herring. The band have been writing and releasing albums for over a decade, but finally achieved mainstream success after a [2014 performance of their single "Seasons \(Waiting on You\)" on the David Letterman show](#) became a viral sensation. The band's fifth album, [The Far Field](#), was released earlier this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2382 words.

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

Your 2014 album, *Singles*, was a commercial breakthrough nearly a decade after you started as a band. These days to see a group experience that kind of success four albums into their career is unusual. How do you deal with it? And how did it affect what you made next?

Sam: It definitely affects you. I think everything is going to have an effect in some way. Making a really unsuccessful record might affect what you do next as well, or maybe not. To be honest, I don't think we've ever had anything we would consider an unsuccessful record. We feel like we've had records that have flown under the radar and we've always felt like an underdog ourselves, so it was strange to finally get recognition at the age of 30 after we've been doing this for so long. We felt like it was warranted. We felt like we had fought for it and earned it, but it was still surprising. And weird. And as much as I would say that we thought we had been ready for that attention for years, it was still overwhelming.

Everything was growing. The shows were getting bigger as we were doing more interviews, the set list was growing because, if you're playing these big sold out rooms and people are paying good money to see you, we want to give you a show. So everything was kind of stepping up, and honestly there's a lot less pressure to play a sold out show at a 400 person show than it is to be playing to a couple of thousand people. With all of these eyes on you, you feel like you have to be on it all the time. All that definitely took a toll on my body during the tour, which also affects how you write music going forward. I feel like my voice changed after playing 270 shows on that *Singles* tour, which led up to writing a new record.

Is it better to experience that kind of success at the age of 30 than it would be to have it at the age of 20? You're already a seasoned band by that point.

William: Yeah, I think so. We don't take anything for granted. We know how much work we've put into this project. We felt like it was already very successful. It wasn't until the success of *Singles* happened that we were like, "Oh, this is different than the other successes that we've experienced up to this point." Mostly we don't take the attention for granted. We know that it can go away just as quick as it came. We wanted that kind attention when we were younger, but we've seen too many bands over the years suffer because of that. We've seen bands get a lot of exposure from their first album and just not know that to do with it. It's a lot of pressure. I've seen a lot of bands lose it because they didn't know what to do next.

So after playing nearly 300 shows in support of this album, what did you do next? Does everybody go away for a while? Do you give yourself a grace period before you start to think about what to do next?

Sam: We only took about a month off before we started writing again. A big part of that was because, by that point, it was almost two years since the last record had come out and we felt a need to get back to creating something new. It was more like, "Oh shit, it's almost been two years and we haven't written anything! We don't have any songs and we need to put out another record." It's always been really important for us to put out work, even on the years where we're not on the road... even though we've pretty much always been on the road.

We always try to drop new 7" and things. We all have side-projects, we're all always working on a variety of things. I think it was more about a need to be making something new than it was about trying to capitalize on our recent success. This is just what we do. I myself don't really know how to relax, so I'm always ready to work on something new. And it's true, we also know how easy it is to be forgotten in this business, so of course you start to think about that. We just want to always be putting out work, giving back to the people who support you, continuing to feed this thing that you've created.

In the old days, back when we'd first started and we only had a record out and nobody knew who we were, there was this idea that just had to keep touring the US nonstop. It was about hitting that same town or city every three or four months. That's how you built up a fanbase. It meant that your posters were up in those cities for most of the year. That's how you stay in people's consciousness.

So eventually we just felt like we had to get back into the studio and back into making music. We're always hungry to write, at least I am, because this band is also essentially our outlet for dealing with our feelings. When you have this thing that functions as your primary means of self-expression, your main emotional outlet, and have it suddenly turned off or put on hold... it's weird. We've basically learned how to deal with our emotions by being in this band. That hasn't changed. With music being your career and your life, there's not always a lot of time to reflect on the rest of your life—like what's really happening in your life.

As much as we're extremely close as friends, as much as the band can really feel like a marriage, we also sometimes don't know how to have a proper dialogue about how we're feeling, even when we've been together for six months. Tour becomes about the grind from getting from point A to point B, it's not like you spend a lot of time talking about the bigger things. And because touring becomes very difficult on your mind and your body, sometimes you just have to isolate yourself whenever you have a spare moment. Sometimes everyone is technically in the same room, but each person has headphones on and is looking at something different. Sometimes you need that sense of escapism. It's only when the tour is over, when you get back to making new music, that you start to really get into what you are actually feeling. We were much more interested in thinking about that stuff than we were thinking anything like, "Oh we need to write another *Seasons* now!"

So when you are all back together in a room and it's time to start on a new record, how does that process work? Has your way of working changed much over the years?

William: No.

Gerrit: It was pretty much stayed exactly the same for the past 14 years that we've made music together.

William: 14 years ago we were in a different band with other people but it's always been basically the same with the three of us. It's almost always born from jams.

We just go into a room and start playing. There's times when Gerrit will bring ideas to the room, but even then we'll be like, "All right, let's just jam on it for a few hours and see what happens." The formula with writing this record was to have no formula. We wanted to not change what we did because we felt like we had finally stumbled upon what worked. We found a bigger audience with our last record by doing what we've always done, so we didn't want to fuck with that.

That's the thing that often trips people up, especially after a big success. You don't want to repeat yourself too much, but you don't want to change so radically that you'll alienate people. Overthinking those things can really mess you up sometimes.

Sam: Oh, definitely. Doing this for years now, you learn that you're not going to make everybody happy. You're gonna gain fans and you're gonna lose fans. You have to be unafraid as an artist to be who you are. You have to believe in what you do or else you're gonna be really bummed out when you're having to play music that maybe other people love but you don't. There have been times that we've had songs that are still really important to me and are really important to the set that I didn't necessarily want to play anymore because they hurt a certain side of me or they brought up feelings, years down the road, that I didn't want to share anymore, but usually if the song is coming from the right place, you don't mind playing it. The words may be set in stone but how we approach them can change. With a song like "Seasons" for example, some people say, "Aren't you tired of playing that song?" It's like, "No, that song has done great things for us." It comes from a genuine place. Every time you play it, it's easy. You don't even have to work that hard.

Part of what people love about your band, particularly with your live shows, is how intense you are. As a performer you're emotional and seemingly un-self-conscious, which inspires a

similar reaction in your audience.

Sam: After [that famous Letterman appearance](#) the line that started to circle around us was "They dance like nobody's watching!" I guess maybe that's what people wanted out of seeing us, they wanted to be able to let go. But for us it was actually about dancing like *everyone* is watching. People don't realize how extremely conscious we are of how we look and what we're doing and exactly what we're aiming to do through our music and performance.

As a performer, of course I want people to see me as unapologetic and raw and real and open and un-self-conscious, but as a person I am extremely self-conscious. Being a performer allows you that power to be whoever you want to be, even if that is occasionally embarrassing or uncomfortable. It allows me to be a better version of myself, that person who wants to be a friend and wants to help, but also a person who can be the friend asking for help.

How do you keep from exhausting yourself when doing that?

Sam: It does take an emotional toll on me but it's OK. We're very much just nice southern guys from small towns and hard working families. I'm probably a little bit ridiculous even or silly but I think it's important to show people that you can go through these emotions. Conceptually, that's part of Future Islands, too. You go through these emotional highs and lows but then you're just a person in the end. I will rip my heart out and cry and the crowd is screaming for us, but when the song is over I just smile. I've had people say to me, "It's crazy that you're just like a regular person, you guys are just regular dudes off stage." Like, "Why aren't you the same on stage as you are off stage?" And I'm just like, "Would you want to meet that guy?" The reason you get up on stage and go through all of that is that you don't have to be that guy off stage.

The conceptual idea of what we do is trying to bring people into a space—whether that's them alone in their room with headphones or into an actual room for a show—and showing them that you can be extravagant and huge in your emotions and you can be broken and weak. That's okay. Both are powerful.

William: I feel like we're still the same band we've always been, there's just a greater expectation with the bigger audiences. We also have a bigger team now. There's just a lot more stuff that goes along with it. We're still kind of figuring it out. I don't want to say we're having growing pains, but we're still kind of adjusting to it. This tour or this cycle is definitely the most "professional" thing that we've ever done. We come from very DIY roots and it feels like we have completely shed almost 100% of our DIY-ness on this current tour, which is kind of a bummer because I really appreciate that aspect of it. I think we're trying to hold on to whatever we can that keeps things as much DIY as we can.

Sam: In a way, the stage is the only place where we can still really be free to be that band, to continue to be that really passionate band, even though it's gonna be a lot different when you're on a huge stage in front of thousands of people as opposed to being on the floor surrounded by people who are grabbing you or trying to hug you while you play.

Success is weird. Now we're back at this place of being like, "Oh, we just need to be a band again and not worry about the stuff." You try and not let it get to you, but mostly you just hope that it doesn't impact the stuff you make in a bad way. A lot of our songs have to do with not listening to what people have to say about who you need to be as a person, but finding out who you are as a person and *being* that. Now more than ever that feels very appropriate for us.

Essential Future Islands:

["Seasons \(I've Been Waiting on You\)"](#) live on David Letterman

Future Islands [Live on KEXP](#)

["Ran"](#) - from 2017's *The Far Field*

["The Great Fire"](#) from 2011's *On the Water*

["A Dream Of You And Me"](#) from 2014's *Singles*

Name

Future Islands

Vocation

Musicians

Fact

[Future Islands is a synth-pop band from Baltimore comprised of Gerrit Welmers, William Cashion, and Samuel Herring. The band have been writing and releasing albums for over a decade, but finally achieved mainstream success after a 2014 performance of their single "Seasons \(Waiting on You\)" on the David Letterman show became a viral sensation. The band's fifth album, *The Far Field*, was released earlier this year.](#)



Tom Hines