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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2471 words.

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On confronting your fear of what the audience thinks

Guitarist, artist, and model Hayden Pedigo discusses isolation, competition, and putting healthy pressure on yourself.

What role did isolation play in your creative path?

It's a double-edged sword. For me it was integral because I was incredibly bored when I was young. I was homeschooled, lived out in the middle of nowhere. The only way I could entertain myself was through music and art. It's something I think about a lot even now because I still live in Amarillo. Sometimes I think being entertained is the death of creativity. Boredom can be one of the greatest things to inspire creativity. Boredom forces me to do things because there's a sense of paranoia, a fear of missing out. Musically, the culture is not in Amarillo. Whenever I go to L.A., it feels like everything's happening, it kind of blows my brain. I always knew if I lived in L.A. I would be so overwhelmed that I probably wouldn't make things anymore.

I'd imagine it pushed you to be more self-sufficient as well.

Absolutely. When I was a teenager, I got into John Fahey, like a lot of others have. I dove into it head first, but I wasn't associated with any kind of regional scene, I had none of that. It opens up this whole Pandora's box. We're living in this post-genre, post-everything age. I was reading about this shoegaze band, they're super young and their influencers are wild, all over the place. Thinking about bands like 100 Geecs, the post-genre idea, about how awesome that is. I saw it bubbling up when I was younger with people like James Ferraro and Ariel Pink. To me, they were early post-genre, post everything musicians. We're in this post-genre age because we have access to everything. We don't really have regional music anymore. Everything from western swing music from a certain part of Texas, like Bob Wills or hill country blues, like R. L. Burnside.

I think it encourages bands to skip that stage and go on tour right away.

I didn't tour at all for eight, nine years. I started putting out music when I was 18, and only started touring in the past two years. I waited a crazy long time. My first four albums were made in Garageband at home. Rough, minimal recordings. I only just now feel like I'm coming into my own with my music and understanding what it is that I do. I wouldn't have wanted people to hear me live five years ago.

How did Odd Future impact your approach to releasing music?

I discovered Odd Future when I was 18. I was a little late to them. They had already gotten quite a bit of buzz. I was into blog-era experimental music. There was a website called Mutant Sounds that I was obsessed with. I hadn't listened to a ton of rap music, but was intrigued by their aesthetic. It was brash, obnoxious, and it clicked with my sense of humor.

I was more interested in their aesthetic and approach before getting into the music. All of a sudden, it started to make sense. I was like, "What if I take Odd Future's approach and attach it to what I do?" That's why I ended up reaching out to people I wanted to collaborate with through Facebook, and how things started to grow from there. That was part of the internet that I really enjoyed.

Did you have any hesitation when you started reaching out?

I didn't have a lot of fear. The reason why is because I was homeschooled the entire way. I never went to public school. I was very isolated, and didn't have friends growing up. I've always said that if you're homeschooled, it rewires your brain. I think public schooling, for better or worse, instills in you a kind of social hierarchy. You understand a chain of command in terms of how things are done. For most public schoolers, if they wished chicken strips were on the menu, they wouldn't walk down to the principal's office, knock on the door and say, "Hey, I want chicken strips on the menu. How can we get this done?" They would understand that would be kind of inappropriate, and wouldn't do that. If I wanted chicken strips for dinner, I would go talk to my mom, she was also my school teacher.

Immediately the hierarchy is different because the hierarchy is my parents and I feel comfortable to go talk to them. Once I got on the internet, I was an incredibly odd, forward kid. I probably have so many embarrassing Facebook messages that are cringey because I was like, "Hey, I have this idea." It was unreal how many people I was reaching out to, but I was probably too dumb to know how weird I looked. That was the whole deal, I didn't understand that I looked strange, but it worked to my benefit that I was overly forward with people asking, "Hey, want to work together?" My intentions were good, people picked up on the fact that I wasn't doing it for clout, I was doing it for interest.

It's important to start from a place of pure excitement.

I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago on tour. I was in San Francisco and stayed with my friend Chip Lord. I believe he's 80 years old. He's one of three guys that created Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo. An absolutely unreal artist. While I was there, he was showing me pieces he'd made over the years. While he was telling me about them, his passion was so tangible that I said, "The reason why your stuff is so great is when I look at it, before I even think about art, I see the interest." The best art should have the same feeling as when a 5-year-old kid is telling you why he loves his train set. That's the truest interest you'll ever see. This 80-year-old artist still has that same interest as a five-year-old kid.

You are now doing music 'full-time.' What are the pros and cons of holding down a day-job?

For over 10 years I was working at bank jobs. For a long time, there was this level of intrigue. Playing in experimental noise bands and working at a bank during the day. There was chaos in it that I liked. Two opposite things clashing together into this messy hodgepodge of insanity. It feels more insane than being a full-time artist or musician. There's something far more chaotic about it. I liked the dual personality thing.

I would also have some of my best ideas on the clock. I feel weird saying this, but sometimes I would do the bare minimum and pretend to be on the computer while I was reading articles about music and art. I was also sending emails to record labels. I signed with Mexican Summer while on the clock. Signed my contract and scanned it on the workplace copier. There's an element of being sneaky, trying not to get caught.

In 2016 or '17, I took a trip to San Francisco to perform. After the show I met Christopher Owens from Girls, who I'd looked up to forever because he lived in Amarillo. We stayed up walking around till 1 A.M. talking about music. It felt like a dream. The next morning I get on the plane, fly home, then I'm in my cubicle at the bank. That was the worst part, it felt like I was giving myself brain damage. The whiplash was too much. I realized going back and forth is actually dangerous and not healthy.

Have you felt more at ease since leaving?

Yes and no. Yes because I've been able to focus on what I do, and that is incredibly liberating, but also terrifying because it makes you view what you do in a more serious way. It's a different type of pressure and expectation from yourself. People say, "Oh, you'll feel more pressure to make stuff when it's your full-time thing." I appreciate having pressure to do something I enjoy versus the pressures I had at banks to get work done that I had no interest in. There's nothing worse than pressure to do something you don't care about. It can be scary to have pressure to do something you deeply care about. I feel honored that I feel pressured to do something that means a lot to me. I take it incredibly seriously. I can seem silly on social media, but I care a lot, even when it's joking around, posting something dumb or writing an essay or posting a photo.

Do you feel pressure to finish songs or albums quickly?

I opened up this discussion the other day on Instagram. I was talking about streaming killing the album and the pressure of constantly having to produce singles, EPs, Bandcamp subscriptions, etc. I had a caveat where I was saying, look, for some people being prolific and releasing a lot of stuff works. I understand that. It's not inherently bad. I'm a motivated person, but I don't like being motivated by stuff I don't care about. I view albums like films. No one ever asked Stanley Kubrick to release short films in between his movies. It'd feel weird. "Can you release a 15-minute short film before you release *The Shining*?" No one ever would ask that of him. He always produced intriguing, bizarre films that are different from each other. You can see the time that went into them.

I try to hold tight to the fact that I don't owe anyone anything when it comes to my music. I don't owe it to people to put it out. Ultimately I want to impress myself. If I do that, it's good for everyone else. I have no interest in fulfilling expectations in terms of how much I put out or when people want to hear more. Unfortunately streaming, Bandcamp Fridays, things like that put pressure on me to go faster, even though I don't want to. That's bad motivation. That's not the positive motivation that I naturally have.

You've described yourself as a competitive person. Does competition create motivation?

Absolutely. Again, it's this double-edged sword. I've been competitive with other people, along with being competitive internally. Being competitive to create, to me, is like nitrous oxide with a car. It will make it go faster and it works, but there's a high risk of blowing up your engine. It works well until it doesn't. I can get into trouble quickly with that mentality. It's a young thing. When you're in your 20s, you're very competitive. That can be a great motivator, but it's not a sustainable motivator.

You speak about stage fright during performances. What led to wanting to be vulnerable with audiences?

This past summer I went on tour with Jenny Lewis. I agreed to do that, but didn't actually think about what was required to do those opening sets. It wasn't until I showed up to the first show in Chicago, an 8,000 capacity venue, that I realized, "Wait, I don't know if I can do this." I agreed to play these shows without knowing if I can play a solo guitar set to this many people. It was pure terror, but also this belligerent "Hell, no, I can't let this stop me. I have to do everything in my power to ensure I can play this show." Luckily, the first show I played I held on for dear life and made it.

It was terrifying, but I made it through. I started to get my confidence up, had one show where I nearly lost it on stage. I thought I was going to have to walk, my nerves were so high. I had my head pressed against the guitar, as if I was going to fly away. The first three shows had gone great, then that fourth one went so bad. I was terrified the next night because I thought it would be a repeat. From there I started talking about my stage fright. I saw massive improvements when I was just addressing it. Mentally this wall was broken because the audience had context. Internally I started having this mentality of, I don't care if I look insane or dumb on stage. A lot of that came from comedians like Nathan Fielder. You know he's the most confident person because he doesn't care how embarrassing he looks. That translates to live music, this idea of "I don't care what the audience thinks of me" as a tool to know that I really do care. The best way to give them my best performance is not considering what they think.

What happens if you get stuck?

If by the second or third day I'm stuck and it's not working, I usually will scrap it. I find an open tuning and start picking around until I find a melody or something I like. I follow that melody to the end of the song. I have to be willing to scrap the entire thing and move on because I can't waste a lot of time. Everyone has a different approach with writing, this long excursion, excavating out of the ground, like you're digging and finding it can be this long process. For me it's more like following a bird. If it flies away too quickly, it just wasn't meant to be.

How do you deal with the post-release come down?

That goes back to why I don't write a single piece of music for over a year. A lot of people don't understand, you can write a whole other record four months after the last one, but it could potentially be B-sides because you haven't given enough time to create a new thing. I think of music like going to a greasy-spoon style diner. The joke being that on those grills, you can taste everything. You get a burger, you can still taste the pancakes or bacon. There's a beauty in that, but when it comes to music, I don't want people to hear my record and be like, "Well, this feels a lot like that last record." I'm always trying to give myself enough room to tell a different story.

Hayden Pedigo recommends:

Mason Lindahl who is the greatest living guitar player

Releasing less music. No singles or EPs. I'm kidding but I'm also not kidding at all.

Sprayaway glass cleaner.

George Zupp out of Marathon, Texas. He is probably my favorite painter.

The 1859 St. Joseph's Church in Galveston, Texas. The most beautiful room I have ever played in.

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Vocation

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