Joe Goddard on getting lost in your work

April 18, 2017 - Joe Goddard is a member of the English band Hot Chip. Outside the band, Goddard also plays and records with 2 Bears and works as a producer and remixer for other artists. He's the co-founder of the record label Greco-Roman and recently released his first full-length solo album, *Electric Lines*.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2508 words.

Tags: Music, Production, Anxiety, Collaboration, Process.

You already have two ongoing creative projects, Hot Chip and 2 Bears. Why'd you decide to make a solo record?

However lovely it is to collaborate, there's always an element of compromise when you're working with other people, and so I wanted to experiment with making *all* of the creative decisions. That gave me the opportunity to explore some ideas with all the gear that I've been collecting over the years. I have a studio that I rent in East London that I've been renting for about two years, and I have all of my gear out and plugged in and ready to go, and I can explore it and use it quite easily. I just wanted to explore composition as an individual. It was liberating, but also kind of scary. I realized that in trying to create something by yourself, there's always this emotional rollercoaster that you're on. I'd begin a new song, and for the first three or four hours, I might not feel like I was getting anywhere. Or I would get totally lost in the process. You learn a lot about yourself by working alone.

In the past I've always had a collaborator, whether it's Alexis or the other guys in Hot Chip, or Raf in 2 Bears, there is someone constantly there to give input about the writing and provide feedback. You don't realize how much you actually come to depend on other people's input until you suddenly don't have it. Making this record, there were moments where you are are emotionally unsure and suddenly don't know how to finish something. You have moments when you're at your wit's end, and you don't know how to get things done. You have to figure out for yourself how to push through it.

Technology keeps changing. Do you find that your process—your way of making songs—has also shifted over the years?

I'm incredibly familiar with the software that I use and I've been using it for the past 20 years or so. That being said, I'm still not even really a master of it. Even now there are elements of the software that I just don't understand. There are functions in the software where I don't even know what they do. It's like I figured out how to use it just enough to make it work and then I stopped. The things that I like to do, I can do them quickly and easily, which is all that matters to me most of the time. So the amount of time between having an idea for a track, having an idea for a rhythm or a chord sequence or a sound, and actually turning it into reality and making it, is very quick, so that, creatively, you can get down your ideas as you're having them. There isn't any need now to learn something in order to realize your ideas, you know? So I'm adept at doing what I do.

On the other hand, I feel like it probably would be in my best interest to learn a new piece of software and to explore new tools. A new piece of software might spark my creativity and inspire me. I think about Lee "Scratch" Perry, who was not only incredibly creative and talented, but also amazing at getting great sounds out of a limited amount of gear in a short amount of time. Apparently after he had his first number one hit in Jamaica, he supposedly poured concrete into his mixing desk so that the settings would always be the same, so that he would always have the same EQ and levels and the drums would have the same sound. He was just like, "All right, I know

how to make it now.” The settings were literally set in stone.

In a way, limiting yourself and just becoming really good specifically at what you do can be good. You lock in on what works for you and you follow that path. Still, I always feel like I should be keeping up with the technology and learning something new, but I can’t ever be bothered to take that three months or however long it would take out of my life to learn that new software. I want to get on with making the next beat for a track, or recording some chords that I’ve dreamt about. I want to get it down and turn it into reality. The simple act of making something is what I really love. I don’t have any time for the *learning* part of it.

The increased availability of technology has made creating and recording music easier, but it also means that you can mess with a piece of music forever and never be done with it.

That’s a real problem that some people have. I know a lot of bedroom producers that seem to have a profound psychological block with the idea of finishing something. They don’t want to ever say that a piece of work is completed, so they’ll be tinkering with the same detailed sound loop for eight years or something, and you literally sometimes need to wrestle that music away from them and release it. That is the danger of all of this software, and I try to never get caught in that trap. I’m always trying to move forward and get things done and get things out.

My philosophy is that nothing is ever going to be perfect. Even the stuff that I’m the most proud of, I don’t think it’s perfect in any way. So yeah, I like to keep moving. I think a lot of producers get caught in that thing—always tinkering and never thinking that something is finished. That’s also something that’s difficult when you’re working on your own, because you only have your own ears to guide you. You try to be objective and open up a track on your laptop from day to day and say, “It’s good!” but the ease and possibility of tinkering means that it’s really hard not to keep going. It’s hard when there is no one else around to say, “Stop. You’re done.”

I think it’s interesting that within one laptop you have the ability to make incredible music these days, and many people do. There are plenty of lone producers making amazing stuff out of that same basic software. However, it does mean that the old idea of a record producer, someone like Quincy Jones, becomes increasingly rare. I always had this idea of a producer as someone having an incredible Rolodex. Need a guitar solo? Let me call up Eddie Van Halen. The producer has the numbers for all the most the amazing drummers and bass players, all the best engineers and songwriters. The producer gathers everyone in the studio and you’re all there together, collaborating and making a record.

I know that this isn’t how most records are made now, but I think you do lose something when you don’t have that human collaboration involved as well. That’s something that you have to look out for when you’re making music purely on that one laptop. The power that you have in one of these computers is incredible, but it’s easy to lose perspective. It’s easy to get lost.

You have an interesting career in that you’ve been able to do some aspect of *all* of those things—operate within the context of a group, make your own music, and remix other people’s material. You’ve also worked as a producer for other people. This range of roles allows you to look at the process of what it is to make a song from every possible angle.

That’s true. I really think remixing, for instance, is a great way of just learning about the mechanics of a song. I remember when Hot Chip was just starting out, we would occasionally be asked to remix a track by a famous band, and you would get all of the stems for the track sent over—all the isolated parts of the song. That was a massive learning process for me. You would listen to the various bits and think, “Oh, *this* is how you do it. This is how you mic a drum kit, you put two different mics on the snare drum. Wow.”

I also think DJing gives you a great perspective on songwriting and creating rhythms and understanding chords. You’re getting a very close up, visceral perspective on what actually makes people excited, and what makes people happy, and what makes people move in a club environment. So I think that really is valuable as well. These are all opportunities to learn, all things that will make your own music better.

I’m obsessed with the idea of producing music. Producers are kind of the people that I admire the most, whether it’s Brian Wilson or Phil Spector or George Martin, these are the figures that I’m more obsessed with, even more than the bands they produced or a particular singer. It’s the process that gets me, all the different ways that you can produce a record. All the different ways you can facilitate creativity. A producer is a very amorphous role. It can mean so many different things. I love looking at the different aspects of what that role can be.

On this solo album I wrote and played a lot myself, but honestly I’m equally happy to produce a track that I don’t actually feature on at all. I’m quite happy to sit behind the desk and just try to get people together in the same room and get the best stuff out of them as players. It’s equally satisfying.

I read a fantastic article about Billy Joel’s producer, and he was talking about the producer as psychoanalyst and therapist. The producer is trying to get the artist into a comfortable place. You wanna make the artist feel so secure and so loved and so open that you can easily get that perfect performance out of them. And that’s exactly right. In his opinion, it’s not really about things being perfect, it’s just about getting the artist to that moment where they feel like nothing they could possibly do will be judged badly, like they’re never going to be made to feel bad. Sometimes you need a producer for just that. You can’t always provide that for yourself as a solo artist, you know? You can’t always be your own best cheerleader.

I remember we worked with Peter Gabriel once on a remix of a Vampire Weekend song. The song that name-checks Peter Gabriel. We essentially did a remix and then got Peter Gabriel to sing on the track. So we went to his studio, Real World, to work on it. He was telling us that when he was in Genesis and he went into the vocal booth to record his vocals, he would often feel like he was being judged by the rest of the band. Occasionally he felt like they would laugh at him and as a result he didn’t feel creatively open. So in his studio there is no vocal booth. The singer is just in the same room with everyone else. There’s no division in the space so that he didn’t ever have to go into another little room by himself to sing. I thought that was interesting. Part of creating something is also establishing a space where you feel safe and free. It’s easy to forget that, even though it seems so obvious.

I think even someone as famous as Quincy Jones would say that they’re still learning about being a producer, because it’s such an open-ended, amorphous thing. It’s like chess or something, you know? You can always keep learning. You’re always picking up little bits of insight into how to do things. Whether it’s like, how to use different microphones, or how to get performances from musicians, or any of these things. You’re always learning.

Hot Chip has been a band for a long time now. Has your definition of success and failure changed over the years?

Absolutely. Hopefully, you realize more and more what is truly important. I think of someone like David Hockney, for instance, who’s just been painting and creating for 50 or 60 years. Just working and working, always moving forward. Aside from the commercial aspects of being in a band, the actual feeling—the state of mind that you get into when you’re just alone in the studio working—that, for me, remains the best thing. You want to get lost in it. That state of mind you go into when you make something, whether it’s touching a synthesizer or painting on a canvas, that moment of creating… that’s really the optimum state of mind, when the rest of the world goes away and you’re just left focused nicely on the sound that you’re creating, or the painting that you’re doing, or the sculpture that you’re making, or the article that you’re writing. I don’t think you can really get better than that. If you work with wood and you’re making a table and you spend your whole day just touching these rough materials… I feel a bit like that when I’m making a song. Kind of like a craftsman. I enjoy the process. Sometimes it doesn’t matter what the end result is.

Joe Goddard recommends:

The Tale of The Princess Kaguya - Miyazaki is arguably the more famous of the Ghibli directors, but this final film made by his mentor Isao Takahata is overwhelmingly beautiful and is probably my favourite Ghibli work.

Wiley, Dizzee Rascal, DJ Slimzee from Sidewinder in 2003 - This inspires me to make dance music whenever I listen to it. It is one of Slimzee’s dubplates, which chopped up the biggest proto-grime and garage tunes of the day to create a constant stream of new music, and new ideas. Way ahead of its time.

Gerhard Richter — *Painting* - I like this documentary because it demystifies Richter’s artistic process and shows

that the working methods of creative people in different disciplines are similar. You work, reflect, alter, attempt to evaluate what you have done and either finish or discard the work. Then you move on to the next piece of work. I like the simplicity of the idea that it is the act of making the work that is the important and worthwhile part of the endeavor.

Yuval Noah Harari - *Sapiens* - A fascinating overview of the whole history of the species Homo Sapiens- it is very readable and deals with most of the important evolutionary stages and societal developments of the species with a dispassionate and entertaining eye.

Raymond Carver - *All Of Us: The Collected Poems* -Heartbreaking work from Carver, gets me every time. Good for lyric writing!

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Vocation
Musician, Producer

Fact

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