

On being your own biggest hater



An interview with musician and songwriter Julian Casablancas

March 29, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2560 words.

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

Are you someone who is always working on music?

I record and write and come up with ideas all the time. Usually I don't even know what it's for. I guess it's kind of an editing process that involves thinking things like, "Oh, this is something cool" or "This might be funny." There are a lot of categories it might eventually fall into—it could be a song or just something I play for my kids. I have a lot of different outlets. You could hear the song and think, "Oh, this would be a cool movie score," and you put it in that pile of stuff. I don't try to figure out what I'm working on while I'm doing it, because it's pointless. You have no perspective in the present.

Has that always been your way of working?

Not really. Well, I still kind of have the same process I always have—working on two or three things at a time. When I started recording what I was doing, I would realize that the things that I thought were good sometimes were not so good, and things that I initially threw out were actually better. So I kind of do both now. I pay attention to both. I also try to stay on top of things and finish them, even if I don't know what it will become. If I think of a weird line I'll make myself stop and write it down. It might be the chorus of a single or a title or it might just never be used. I stockpile a lot of titles. You can never have enough potential titles.

You made a solo record a few years ago and one assumes you could just go on working that way forever if you wanted to, but The Voidz is now a really tight band. Is there something more pleasurable about working in the context of a band?

I realized when I was rehearsing for the live shows with the first solo record that I don't like doing things by myself. It's more about having chemistry with people in a room. The dream was always to kind of have a kind of...well, I don't want to say dream team, but that's sort of what it is. You just want the vibe and chemistry to be right and for each instrument to be the coolest in its own right, all of it creating a thing that's really good.

It was kind of a long quest to find that. Also, finding the right personalities was important. You just can't manufacture that. You can find the best players in the world and put them in a room together, but that doesn't mean it will make for good music. I worked with a lot of different, random people over the years, including people I didn't know who just reached out to me, to friends who just happened to be hanging out. There's a hundred ways to meet people and collaborate. The Voidz was kind of the similar process of the Strokes. You find people and you vibe with them and you have chemistry that you build on. When the Voidz finally coalesced it was six very different people doing something that we couldn't or wouldn't necessarily do alone, something greater than the sum of our parts.

The records we've made have all felt very collaborative to me. I don't really think of them in terms of cohesiveness. I like to think of them as a mix tape. I know people that love records, but I've never been one of those people. Not since I was maybe 14 or something did I really listen to a whole record. I like "Best of" albums. I want to make records that feel like that. We work together in a lot of different ways, but it's often that sort of organic jam magic that is best, that thing where we just play and it's about making shit up on the spot, experiencing these magical moments. We could probably just make music all day and make albums once a week, but you also have to be an editor at some point. To try to make it a cohesive, deliverable thing is almost a bigger challenge than coming up with stuff.

Creative chemistry—the thing that binds bands together—is a mysterious thing.

It is. It's like a lot of things that are slightly more complex than we can totally understand. We just know whether it works or not. With the Voidz we've all already been in bands and experienced all the clichés, dramas, and problems and behaviors and ways that things can go astray. We have all been through the B.S. side of being in a band and were just genuinely glad to find other people with the same musical goals who were on the same wavelength and had the same sense of humor. We all have a mutual respect for each other and we're friends. I don't know...it's fun. We hang out, we work. When a band really works it's this magical bubble and then when you have to leave the practice space it's like waking up from a dream. It's like, "Oh yeah, I've got a real life. I have to pay taxes and go be an adult."

Do you find that your attitude towards music making and creativity has changed as you've gotten older?

It's gotten both easier and harder in different ways. I feel very grateful that my mind has the capacity to grow and change. Sometimes when you're young you feel like you're never going to change, but I think that I've always been searching and trying to learn and improve. I think that now I understand better when something is working or when it isn't and why that is.

Knowing how far to push things when it comes to arrangements and stuff is something I've certainly learned as I've gotten older. How far is too far? When a song makes that leap from being a demo into a finished track, it's so easy to just destroy things. There are so many subtle things that can make or break it. Learning what those things are and identifying them is a valuable skill. There's a lot of things that I now just know, that are second nature to me now actually that took years to develop. Years of asking, "Why is this not working?" It's years of trying to solve some kind of riddle.

So I feel really grateful to know all that, but at the same time, knowing all that means that you just have a shit ton of work to do every time. Once in awhile, something will just be easy and sound good right away and that's great—that's the best—for a lazy person at heart, like me.

Making music can be frustrating, but it's also a great feeling. The first time you write something that you know is powerful and the first time you hear it back in the speakers, those are the best moments for a musician and writer. When you're like, "Oh shit." When we've played together in a room and it comes to life and sounds amazing and you're like, "Whoa. This is going to blow people's minds." That's a great feeling. Then you'll record it and maybe at first it will sound like shit, but then eventually you record it and it sounds good and you're just like, "Oh my God. This is going to be great."

Those moments of victory are what give you the juice to do the rest of it. Otherwise, it's miles and miles of trudging and nudging to get it out the door. There's 27 million layers to the process. Basically once you do something good, there's still 100 ways to fuck it up before you are actually done with it. I think it's something like painting, where you can't necessarily see all the work contained within the painting itself. If I was a painter I don't think I would ever know when to stop. I think I would just take lots of pictures of it while I was painting it and then not look at the final version for six months. That's the thing, you can work something to death and it's hard to go backwards.

It's generally easier to add than it is to take away.

That's the problem—the adding is what ruins it. In a movie or a with a video, it's the editing. Filming a movie or a video, it's like "Fun! Hey, we'll get some wigs, we'll laugh. We'll get the lighting. Oh, this looks so cool. High five. Let's shoot it again. Wasn't that great? We're filming stuff!" But then the editing is just like torture, which is a bummer because that's really where you make or break it. Suddenly you're like, "I've looked at this 1,000 times. I don't even know what I'm looking at anymore." Same with recording sometimes. But that's often where you make it either good or really not good, and that's not a fun process.

When it feels like something isn't working, are you someone who knows when it's time to walk away?

If I believe that it just needs a change in order to be something amazing and we just haven't hit the target yet, it might appear that I'm beating it to death, but when I see some value in it, it does usually have value. I think I'm also good at, "Okay, that's not cool. Let's just forget it."

I think that's actually always been my biggest asset. Even with the Strokes, from day one, we'd have demo songs and everyone would be like, "Let's do it" and I'd be the one saying, "No. This is not good." I think I learned from my stepdad and his side of the family the value of being hard on yourself and honest with yourself.

Basically you're like a parent with your own work. You know you're going to irrationally love it and think it's smarter and better than anything else, so you have to almost counter that with a weird, irrational hatred/distrust. You have to look at everything with intense hater goggles. Only after you look it with the intense hater goggles and you're like, "Well, I guess that's okay." can you safely say, "Oh, I think this is good." I'm good at doing that, because I can usually just hater goggle it. That's something I just invented right now-hater goggling. It's not like I've been saying that for years. I'm OK with being like, "Oh yeah, as a hater I triumphantly hate that and then throw it in the garbage." Sometimes you need to.

Another benefit of being in a band: there are other people in the room who can be honest when something is stupid or a bad idea.

Also, I think maybe you need to have high standards if you're going to make art? That's not true. I know some people who just love everything and that's fine. But personally I just think that deep down, you do know if something is bad. It's just hard to tap into that radical self-honesty. Let's say you write a line and you think, "Oh, that's a good line. I like that line." But the test it needs to pass should maybe be, "Is that a mind-blowing line that's equal to my favorite mind-blowing line in my favorite book? Is it equal to the best line I've ever written?" I think that's the question to honestly answer. Sometimes I think people just skip over it with, "Oh, I like it, so who cares?"

I think I try to hold myself to the same standards now that I did with stuff I was making years ago. That being said, I don't always necessarily have an accurate perception and I admit that. If I hear Is This It now it sounds weird to me because I've heard it a thousand million times. I always just aggressively want to improve. Sometimes if I hear one of our old songs when I'm in a store or something I'll think it sounds good, but there's a level of self-awareness that makes it impossible to have a clear perspective.

The things that I like are not the fan favorites, really. "Barely Legal" kind of makes me cringe a little bit. I get it. It's sassy and youthful and I don't judge it or think about it, but these days I make what I feel like I want to hear. I make things that don't register as high on my own personal cringe meter, but what that means to other people I can't say. I can only gauge it by the way it makes me feel or according to my own personal standards. All I know is that I feel like I'm working as hard as I ever have. Well, it's a little bit harder with kids, but also I've gotten to be more like a wily old veteran, so I'm probably less wasteful with energy. I'm still working as hard as time permits.

Do you find it hard to talk about creative process?

You know what I realized? That's the problem that I have in interviews—and why I've over the years fucked up—is because if I'm thinking in my mind or talking with friends, I feel like I can say what I'm thinking and it's clear and maybe I have something of value to say here and there. But when I do an interview and I think I'm on the clock and time-pressured, I ram in words to fill in for the words I can't find... and I end up sometimes being a little controversial to be cool. You're just under weird pressure to say something interesting, so you veer off of what you actually feel and you end up saying weird, controversial shit and the vampire journalist is like, "Yes, I found my prey."

Julian Casablancas recommends:

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari. One of the best books. It's kind of a bible of truth, a bible of humanity.

Oliver Stone's Untold History of the United States is a must read. It's eye opening and a bummer, but also kind of inspiring.

Hostiles. This was one of those movies where I thought maybe I didn't like it, but then I thought, there were a lot of subtle symbolic... I just felt like it was more like one of the movies after you leave you're like, "Oh, I think that was great." If the music was amazing it would have been better, but maybe the music was too subtle.

Joyner Lucas - Gucci Gang (Remix). He basically spectacularly, acrobatically raps over the biggest song with one of the worst original raps of all time. It's so good.

Montevideo, Uruguay. I mean, just Uruguay in general is amazing. So beautiful. It felt like a secret world. Seems like a place that never gets any love but is actually maybe the coolest.

Name

Julian Casablancas

Vocation

Musician



Julian Casablancas with his band, The Voidz