Matt Berninger on patience

October 27, 2016 – Matt Berninger is best known as the vocalist for The National, a group that's performed at small clubs, large festivals, and for President Obama (and, next week, for Presidential Nominee Hillary Clinton). He's also in the group EL VY with Brent Knopf of Menomena and worked with his younger brother Tom and his wife Carin Besser (who used to be the *New Yorker*'s fiction editor) on the 2014 documentary, *Mistaken for Strangers*. He and Carin are currently developing an episodic TV series. It stars Tom.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3624 words.

Tags: Music, Adversity, Beginnings, Inspiration, Success, Anxiety.

I was an artsy kid. I took art classes in high school; that was my main thing. I loved art, but I was also kind of brainy. When I went to college, I decided I was going to be a doctor. I was in pre-med for one year at Miami University of Ohio. I hated it. I wasn't bad at it, but I hated it. The next year, I switched to sculpture. Pre-med to sculpture is a pretty big leap. Then I realized that maybe being a sculptor wasn't going to be enough. I didn't love it enough. So I quickly pivoted to graphic design. It was right before graphic design became a household word, where basically anybody with Photoshop could call themselves a graphic designer. Graphic design sounded sexy. It sounded cool. It was somewhere between art and being a professional. I'd be making album covers and posters for cool things.

So I switched and did that five-year program. I had to start college over from the beginning. I was in college for seven years. That's where I met [National bassist] Scott [Devendorf]. We moved to New York and jumped into these graphic design jobs.

My point is, early on, I got used to bailing out on one life and trying something else. Not bailing, but pivoting. I was comfortable with doing a significant pivot from high school, to pre-med, to sculpture, to graphic design, and then to New York. For whatever reason, I was never nervous about jumping into the unknown. I was lucky that way.

My parents wanted me to be happy. That's what success meant to them.

It's not like my parents had wanderlust, but they were very encouraging. They wanted me to be happy—that's what success meant to them. When I told them I was switching from pre-med to sculpture, I had this sense they were going to think it was great. Most parents would probably say, "What?" But my parents were like, "If that's what's going to make you happy, that's awesome."

While Scott and I were in design school, I had a little band named Nancy. I didn't do much in that band. I think I sang half the songs, but I couldn't play any instruments. Still can't. When Scott and I moved to New York, that band dissolved.

Both Scott and I did well in New York. We got jobs at places that were just starting to do websites and new media. It was at the beginning of that. We got jobs that were kind of well-paying for just out of college. Then, because they were well-paying, and no one else was doing it, we rose in the ranks. I went from Junior Designer to Creative Director in a handful of years. I felt professionally motivated and excited. I felt like, "Wow. I can be a grownup man in the world, pay my own rent, and buy my own TV."

Once I figured that out, I started having that desire to pick up the band again. It was, in a tiny way, like a very early midlife crisis. Even though over a five-year period in New York I became a professional, I started wanting to blow that off a little bit.

If you're doing anything artsy, the rest of the world's job is to say whether it's any good or not. Because you're making art. You're trying to be a magician. You're trying to be an illusionist.

I'll tell you this. I was so crazy about Guided By Voices, Pavement, and all that kind of stuff when I moved to New York. [Guided by Voices' singer/songwriter] Robert Pollard is from 45 minutes away from where I grew up in Ohio. He was a school teacher for a long time, then he pivoted, took this leap, and became a rock star. That made me think, "Yeah, that's possible." Bands like Pavement were like, "Oh, you don't have to be even a virtuoso." [Pavement vocalist/guitarist] Steve Malkmus is an incredible guitar player, but it wasn't like you had to be the kind of "good" that other bands were. You could be a different kind of good. It made me think, "Who cares? That guy did it."

Scott and I got together again, and he called his brother [Bryan], and Bryan called Aaron and Bryce [Dessner]. It was this weird moment where we had all been out of college for a bit and everybody was in New York. I was going to Mercury Lounge all the time because I worked right down the street. I remember seeing Cat Power there, really, really early. I saw things that made me want to write songs again.

Then we started [making music] really slowly. When we began practicing one or two days a week, our rehearsal space was literally right next door to Interpol's. They were next door to us and sounded so damn cool compared to us. We had no idea how to make music together, and then we heard these guys in the other room who knew exactly what they wanted to sound like and exactly what they wanted to look like. That was motivating. We were like, "Holy shit." They literally did a photoshoot in the hallway. I think we had to walk through their *SPIN* photoshoot to get to our room. That was happening right next door to us, so why couldn't it happen in our room, too?

The only way to fuck up is to bore yourself. If you're boring yourself, everyone else is also going to be bored.

Proximity to other people having crazy, reckless, delusional pipe dreams is one of the most motivating things. That's why places like New York are so rich. But yeah, we started slowly. It took a long time to go from playing as the first band at Mercury Lounge at 6:00 p.m. to headlining. It took us a few years to get anywhere close to the world that Interpol were in… at least it felt like that.

There were all these brilliant bands—Interpol, the Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs, The Strokes, Liars, The Walkmen—that had the light on them, and they deserved it. We were definitely in the shadows, off to the side. I went to three of The Strokes' shows during their Mercury Lounge residency in 2000. Nothing made me hungrier than watching that band play live. It wasn't like I wanted to be that band, but they had magic and you just felt it.

Things got better very slowly and incrementally for us, and we could taste it. All of our tiny victories—moving from the 6:00 slot to the 7:00 slot to the 8:00 slot—were significant to us. The fact that it took us a while to get to that 10:00 p.m. headlining slot at Mercury Lounge made it all the sweeter. Being in the shadows gave us time to find the weird branches that we'd end up going out onto. The fact that there wasn't much light on us for the first few years helped us figure out who we were.

I'd almost make an argument that Bob Dylan has more bad songs than good songs. But his good ones are the best songs in the world.

A lot of people think they have to be a genius the minute they walk into the light because they think that's what Bob Dylan was. Even the artists you think are perfect artists, probably had more bad output than good. I'd almost make an argument that Bob Dylan has more bad songs than good songs. But his good ones are the best songs in the world. I think people put too much pressure on themselves, and they can't handle it.

The Strokes seem to have handled it pretty well—going from zero to on the covers of everything in a matter of a few weeks. I wouldn't know what that would do to you. The National never had that moment. I do have a sense that because we never had that moment, we knew we had to do it a different way. Maybe it was the difference that we had good jobs versus shitty jobs.

I don’t know. Any job is, in some way or another, exhausting. The hardest job I ever had in my life was washing dishes, but that was also one of the most motivating jobs. It’s not like we had a ton of disposable income where we were buying better gear and nice guitars.

Matt Berninger recommends:

Oppo headphones
Lap desk (I got mine at Barnes & Noble)
Rollbahn spiral notebooks
Lolita (novel)
THC (active ingredient)

You get out of college and the big question is, “Will I live?” Like, “Am I going to be able to survive on my own?” Every person goes through that phase where, even though you might not live at home, your parents are still helping you. Not everybody, but lucky people, and everybody in The National, I think you could say that we were lucky… None of us were worrying about eating, although many musicians are.

If I had to, I could go back to a job. If I had to, I know how to do an interview. I know how to get a job. If this band fails, I can always go back and be a Creative Director or do lots of different things because I’m good at getting jobs. I’m good at ingratiating myself and making myself appear useful. I knew I could have a job—maybe that’s what it was—it wasn’t the job itself. I figured out I can come back if this rock and roll delusion turns out to be a delusion.

As long as I literally didn’t die on stage, I could always go back to a job.

The epiphany that I never have to go back to another type of job only recently started coming into my head. I don’t know if that’s a good thing. Maybe it’s a bad thing and we’re about to turn into terrible artists because we have no more fear of starving or something. As long as I literally didn’t die on stage, I could always go back to a job.

The funny thing is, I’ve lost a significant amount of my anxiety about what I’m making. I still obsess over it, but I’m not as nervous about making a fool of myself. I used to be very nervous about humiliating myself. I’m not sure that’s such a good thing, but it’s liberated me in a lot of ways. You’ve got to be fearless, but you also have to respect that every thought you have while falling asleep isn’t necessarily worth publishing.

Some artists start to drink their own Kool-Aid. I do think it’s important to be a little bit delusional to be able to do any kind of art. You have to believe in yourself more than everyone else does because, don’t worry, the people that don’t believe in you are going to be very vocal. You have to have a very healthy delusional ego to do anything. But at some point, when your ego starts saying, “Everything I do is awesome,” then you start putting out a lot of crap, and it’s not all awesome. It’s a fun, interesting, dangerous place to be as an artist. I’m enjoying it.

The new record we’re working on, a lot of us feel like it sounds nothing like our other records. Some of the songs do, some of them don’t. We’re also embracing, “Yeah, that song’s a great song, and it is in our wheelhouse, do we need another one like that? Got a lot of songs like that.” We do think about that, but then occasionally, we’re like, “Yeah, it has a vibe like…” Whatever, pick any song. “Mr. November”, or “I Need My Girl”, or “Pink Rabbits.” This one is in that category, and we’re like, “But, it’s really good so who cares? That’s fine.” We’re okay with both. We’re looking for new stuff, but if there’s something that just feels good on a visceral level, we’re over-thinking it less than we used to.

There’s never been a time where as a band we’ve all looked around like, “Ugh, why are we doing this?” Never. Never even close.

We don’t have as much perspective on what we sound like maybe as people outside of the band. Sometimes we think, “This doesn’t sound anything like us,” and people are like, “No, that kind of sounds exactly like you.” It’s hard to have perspective and self-knowledge when you’re in this weird crucible of making something as blurry and subjective as a song with five other adults.

I will say that I don’t remember there ever being a time where we’re together in the studio working on something where at least two-thirds of the people in the band weren’t super excited about it. There’s never been a time where as a band we’ve all looked around like, “Ugh, why are we doing this?” Never. Never even close. I think we’re lucky. Mostly it’s because when somebody gets exhausted or full of resentment or runs out of ideas, somebody else comes in and gets everybody excited again with a different thing.

We’ve got a lot of ambitious people that know when to pick up the baton when somebody else is running out of steam. You need time to get away from shit and come back to it fresh. Bryan is a brilliant drummer. Sometimes he’s feeling it, and some days he’s not feeling it. What he does is so mental and physical and all this kind of stuff, we’ve learned to let Bryan do what he needs to do to get himself either mentally or physically into a space where he can kill it. He’s a drummer that doesn’t sound like other drummers and we give him time to be that drummer. He would maybe argue with us.

That applies to all of us in different ways. Those guys know that if I feel like I’m not happy with the lyrics yet, it’s worth waiting. They want me to be happy. Over time, we’ve learned to respect each other’s weird, sometimes clashing, skills, sometimes clashing personalities. We’ve definitely learned to try to avoid the things that exhaust us and lean towards the things that remind us how we dance well together.

We had no idea how to make music together, and then we heard [Interpol] in the other room who knew exactly what they wanted to sound like and exactly what they wanted to look like. That was motivating.

We try to change things up, but you get five people making a song, it’s reckless. It’s reckless and it’s emotional. It can be full of drama, passion, silliness, anger, and desperation. But that’s life. It’s time to make a rock song. Nobody needs it because a rock song is never going to hurt anybody. That’s what’s fun. You can’t actually fuck up. The only way to fuck up is to bore yourself. If you’re boring yourself, everyone else is also going to be bored.

We had lean years. We learned to have fun with it. Our skin got thicker. We also just learned, “Tonight sucked. Nobody was there in Philadelphia, but tomorrow is Indianapolis. You know what? There were five people in Indianapolis. That’s better than no one.” We actually were able to tell ourselves that five people at a show was good, and it was, because it was better than zero.

Those things definitely gave us perspective. I do think that if you get a big, glossy photo of yourself in a magazine too soon, you think you’re there already. When you realize that, “Oh, shit. The next photo might not be bigger. It might not be glossier. Our name on the poster at the festival isn’t getting bigger. It’s actually getting smaller.” that could be crushing. Some people can’t handle it. We had a lot of phases where the type size of The National on a poster at any given place was big sometimes, and then it would go back. We were constantly reminded that we were nobody.

We had a healthy self-deprecating humor… we never let ourselves believe we were bigger than we were. We were constantly knocking each other down ego-wise. But then when we needed it, we would inflate each other. The fact that it was happening slower maybe allowed us to have the time and perspective an extra night’s sleep to wake up and go, “All right, I’m not walking away yet.”

We probably wouldn’t be a band if we hadn’t had a song in a Saturn commercial way back then. This was way, way back. They told us it was a hybrid [car], and it turned out not to be a hybrid… but we were able to pay off bills. Now there are so many television shows. They don’t pay the way they used to, but there are a lot out there. I think there are ways that musicians can keep the lights on and pay the bills without being a big band. That’s a whole other conversation, the ethics behind letting your music be used in a product placement is a whole other debate.

I’m glad I’m not a lawyer, but I’m glad people are fighting against free streaming and all that stuff. But there’s also a reverse to that. Sharing files over the past decade is

probably how 75% of our fans found out about us. It’s always an evolving mixture of fraud and ethics. Companies are always going to figure out a way to take a bigger piece of something than they deserve, but you can find a good balance there.

Respect that terrible, really bad review. Never agree with them, but respect them.

With major labels, we were lucky we always went with the label we felt wasn’t going to fuck us, and they haven’t, because they don’t depend on us to sell millions of records. We don’t make videos that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars that they have to recoup. We went with a label that was going to be patient with us and they followed through on that promise. They’ve been patient with us, and everybody’s doing well. We’re doing well, they’re doing well. We’re happy. We were smart enough to be careful and protect our ability to make the type of stuff the way that we wanted to make it.

Patience… and respect that it takes time. Make sure to give yourself that time. Also respect the failure. Respect every time you play the show when nobody is there. You learn how to be better. Respect that terrible, really bad review. Never agree with them, but respect them. My other thing is when you get reviews, read them all, but read the good ones over and over. Just lean that way. Believe in those, but let the others go, because they’re both probably right. Believing in the bad reviews doesn’t really actually help you much. You might learn a little something or other, but have delusional confidence. Don’t expect it to be there right away, and don’t expect it to stay, but you’re in control of it. You can make whatever art you want to make, and if it’s good, people will love it.

Sometimes people just put up too many expectations for everything. Kanye is a person who sets expectations through the roof in terms of what kind of celebrity you can reach, as an artist. That’s an anomaly. Everything about it is one of those rare cases. He’s like a Keith Richards. A lot of people think they want to be Keith Richards, and they die when they’re 20 because they think they can do that.

Humiliation and defeat is an essential part of being an artist.

Don’t believe you can be Kanye. That’s not necessarily going to work for everybody. Just trust yourself and like the stuff you’re making. Don’t put it out until it’s cooked, but then also don’t be crushed if everyone hates it at first. People will provide you with far more reasons to stop and to give up than to keep going. Obstacles and defeats will be a part of it from the second you start. Humiliation and defeat is an essential part of being an artist.

If you’re doing anything artsy, the rest of the world’s job is to say whether it’s any good or not. Because you’re making art. You’re trying to be a magician. You’re trying to be an illusionist. Literally, you’re trying to create a unicorn, a good song. If you put out something that’s like just a horn taped to a goat, people are going to say, “Nah, that’s not a fucking unicorn, man,” but occasionally somebody can make a unicorn, and it’s like, “Holy shit.” It makes you believe. You’re making art. People are going to tell you you suck most of the time, but a couple of other people might be like, “I don’t know man. That might be a fucking unicorn. I kind of like it.” The truth is, everything is just a goat with a horn taped to it, but sometimes that’s fucking even cooler than a unicorn.

Those are the weird mind games you have to play with yourself. You have to go to bed and tell yourself it’s all going to work out, every night, one way or another, because then it will. If you don’t tell yourself that, it probably won’t. Delusion is very healthy—up to a point.

Name
Matt Berninger

Vocation
Singer/Songwriter for the National and EL VY, Co-star of *Mistaken for Strangers*, Ex-Creative Director

Fact

Matt Berninger is best known as the vocalist for The National, a group that's performed at small clubs, large festivals, and for President Obama (and, next week, for Presidential Nominee Hillary Clinton). He's also in the group EL VY with Brent Knopf of Menomena and worked with his younger brother Tom and his wife Carin Besser (who used to be the *New Yorker*'s fiction editor) on the 2014 documentary, *Mistaken for Strangers*. He and Carin are currently developing an episodic TV series. It stars Tom.



Deirdre O Callaghan