

On welcoming imperfection



Musician and visual artist Kyle Field (Little Wings) discusses the importance of bad songs, the power of anonymity, and achieving catharsis through mythmaking.

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As told to Fez Gielen, 2674 words.

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Do you have a regimen for writing?

Not having too much ambition is my highest priority because I find that my favorite part of writing songs is the actual writing of a new song. And ambition thwarts that, seemingly. When I'm rhyming words and figuring something out start to finish is when I'm at my happiest, creatively. I'm always ambitious within the song, but I've found that when other things get involved—seeking credit or recognition for what I'm doing—it can really befuddle my creative juices. It sounds hokey perhaps, but it's a matter of purity. The dumber and more in my bubble I stay, the better it all turns out.

Most of the things that have happened commercially for me have been because someone else finds me; it's not because I'm pitching, "This would be a good song for that". So I realized that the greatest thing I can do is just stay in tune, as far as being able to continue writing songs, because who knows? They're useful in and of themselves.

Do you find yourself consciously having to work against that instinct of ambition or chasing money?

Well, there's a Jekyll-and-Hydeness. As much as I just described the monk character, there's also a coyote character that can come out from playing live music for 30 years on the night of a gig, and be like, "No, I'm taking the money." Or, "I have seniority. You're 21 years old, you asked us way out here to play this show, and eight people came—we're taking the 76 dollars." So there's a pirate ethos there, too, that is brutal. And that's not the same human that writes the songs, as far as I can tell. That's the survivalist. Sometimes you have to take life into your own hands in those situations. But that's the least fun part, worrying about money.

And I've done the opposite, where there was a gig where someone was lazily collecting donations, but not enforcing it. I spent four hours there, I was the fourth of four acts, and 15 years older than anyone else. Those are the times when you realize what a rodeo clown your life has really led you to be—where you're like, "I must really love playing music." At the end of that night, the person who is mildly suggesting that people put a dollar in the pot told me, "Well, we only made \$55, and to split it between..." I kind of cut them off and was like, "It's fine, I don't need any." So, there are abstract expressionist principles that vary, chameleon-like, depending on the weather and the mood of the protagonist.

But I see that as part of the art, too. Because there's no management, there's no one telling one what to do when you're in this self-run ship.

I was thinking about singles, and how much of a band or artist's setlist can be dictated by maybe their record label. I can make a record and only play two songs [from it], and move on quickly. Then when people buy the record, they're like, "What are all these other songs?" Which, to me, is a good thing because it's like opening a

box and you don't know what's in it.

Some people don't want to play songs live that aren't recorded yet because it's confusing for people. I personally love to see one of my favorite artists play a song that I don't know. During the song, I'm having the experience of—"Is this a cover song? Did they write this? Could they have written this?" And then finding out it's a new original song. It's like seeing live art or live athletics.

I value the freedom to be able to play whatever the hell I want very, very much. And I think that's a huge ingredient to having no resentment of wanting songs to flow and keep coming.

There's a lot of people canceling tours these days, and an ongoing conversation about how it's becoming less viable to make a living as an artist. Does your faith in an arts career ever get shaken? Have you ever had to have a so-called "regular job" at the same time?

I've had jobs, maybe not that regular in a while. I actually like having a little bit of part-time work, so that I'm not mistaking myself for some kind of rock royalty. I don't want to be that *MTV Cribs* person sitting around in fancy sweatpants like "I really made it," while they're Venmoing their gardener to do all their dirty work. That's disgusting to me. That's what not to become.

I am a scavenger by trade, anyway. I picked up four brand-new bungee cords that still had the tags on them off of the highway the other day, and used them to tarp my old truck that has a rust issue. I consider that a successful life.

Living off the fat of a land that is at times so affluent and so waste-producing; it's kind of easy to get by, if you don't measure success by the same definition that everyone else does. We laugh when we go to the 50%-off stand at the grocery store, and are eating cookies from Christmas a month and a half later. To me, that's fun. That's a joy.

What does success look like for you when making a record or a piece of art?

When a friend who has known me for years writes to me, when I've sent them one of my records, and tells me what they thought of it. That they listened to it is a success. That after 20 years, they'll still be like, "I wonder what this is going to be." And if they like it, or if they still find what I'm doing interesting—to me, that's fantastic.

It might be a treat to experience a positive record review, but that would probably last a day or so. And that's fine; that's not why I'm doing it. I'm doing it to roll the boulder of it all forward, and I know I've succeeded if the songs keep coming, because it's all building off of each other. All the songs are building off of the other songs, and it's kind of this ongoing tale.

Do you ever feel like you've made something, finished it, and failed?

Because I also make visual art, I know how hit-or-miss pictures can be. It's kind of an amateur's perspective to say, "I made a bad picture, I'm a bad artist." Each one's special, like how people compare their songs to children; you could never pick a favorite. The duds kind of provide the background for the standout songs. Sometimes the standout songs are a little too pretty, and that can be boring. I like something that's clunky and misshapen just as much. I'm happy even to make a bad song. There's something there, and sometimes I just have to listen to it several times to know what was actually going on to appreciate it. I believe in being an observer or a witness to your own stuff, and some of them are going to be less understood than others.

Your style of writing varies record-to-record. For example, the writing on Explains is very unique to that record. I know you like Lil Wayne, and that's kind of a Wayne-esque record, right?

Yes, for sure.

Are you consciously setting up exercises or rules for how you write something?

I can't really tell. I'm just re-approaching it as new as possible every time. Things that I'm listening to end up making their way into songs, and sometimes I won't realize it until later. I like that the songs can kind of be a net for what I'm into in other people's music.

With Lil Wayne, I was trying to think about what would be my equivalent, in a sense of—"Well, I can't talk about Fendi or my Gucci sneakers or whatever. What would mine be? Oh, I'm such a dork; mine would be my favorite candy. Alright, I'm going to say that." And it feels good to say that because it feels like me.

So I'm always putting my own spin on it, and putting myself in there, and by doing that, songs feel cathartic. You're kind of saying, "Look at me," but hopefully not just showing something that's obvious. Hopefully someone can learn something new about this person they're listening to, and there's something connective about that sharing.

There's a fine line between stage fright and, "Everyone's looking at me, and I'm fine with that." Early on, I learned to embarrass myself before someone else could embarrass me. I think a lot of where I'm coming from is a sense of showing vulnerability, or displaying how uncool I am.

Earlier you said something about keeping yourself dumb. I think it does take courage to play the fool.

My card is The Fool, in *The Birthday Book*. My friend sent me screenshots of my date this past birthday; I was like, "That makes so much sense."

I'm kind of obsessed with the Fool archetype. This person who—and I'm not saying this is you—is all alone, and making observations that are often nonsensical, sometimes profound, and is outside of things enough to offer a lens on what's happening.

Hey! I resemble that remark!

When writing, is there a goal of getting to an idea, or are you just following your pen?

I like to start with an album title, and one usually firms up once I find some sort of trend or color or anything. Once I put an album title over top in quotes, I can usually have at least four songs already that I'm like, "Yeah, this would be on this album." And there might be four other songs that I'm putting to the left or to the right for a different record.

I'm the most productive when I'm working on a few ideas or a few records simultaneously. That's when I feel best because then I can have two different moods that I'm working on. A lot of times, it's almost a novelty record and the more "authentic self" record being written simultaneously. Sometimes I'll record the novelty record first to get over the fear of the proverbial diving board and be like, "See, you still know how to make a record," and then I'll make the real one that is less whimsical. Like Be Gulls.

Be Gulls was a side thing, but it became too confusing. I just make Be Gulls t-shirts now, and mostly don't make Little Wings t-shirts. It's kind of the stunt-double band name for Little Wings. It's this complicated camouflage mythology that is to stay unknown as long as possible, which is where I feel like I thrive the most.

I've experienced becoming locally well-known in a neighborhood that I lived in once upon a time, and I watched my writing freeze and dry up. If someone's waving to me on the street, and I've made a big enough fool of myself close enough to where I live that people on a day-to-day basis know that I was that guy up on stage singing, it kind of ruins my practice, and I have to move to another town. I've done that before. It froze up and it scared me, and I thought it was gone. Then I learned the lesson that, for me, maintaining a certain level of anonymity is power.

Ever heard of this character Superman? I have to mostly live my life in the Clark Kent character, and then, in a David Blaine way, mysteriously appear and play these songs, and—"How did he remember all those words?" And, "What!? Did he just talk about a diaper with artificial excrement in it?" And then, "Where did he go?" "I don't know, but his weird friend was selling merch, and I bought this t-shirt that is not his band name." It's all obfuscation. That's what's interesting and exciting to me.

So Be Gulls is kind of a third skin on top of Little Wings to keep Kyle Field safe?

And I've already shed it. It originated on a Little Wings album called Grow. We had a skit called "The Be Gulls"; they were Central Coast's greatest band. It was kind of *Spinal Tap*-esque, in our more Hobbit, Shire way.

Then I was like, "Let's make an actual Be Gulls record to expand the mythology." It didn't sound that different from a Little Wings record. It's a little worse than a Little Wings record. Which is good. The Be Gulls should not be better than Little Wings, certainly. [laughs]

Grow is a very trippy record.

Yes. I didn't really know how to use the four-track, which I think is to its benefit. I had the mic just way too hot all the time. When I was singing, the hiss would go away, but then when there's less sound, the hiss is almost like a character on the record.

I was talking to my friend Greg Olin about that record recently. He was like, "You could never do that again. You could never achieve that sense of lostness; you know too much now." I'm still pretty bad at recording. It's interesting. I've been recording on a similar machine in my back room, and I get some funny results. I'm trying not to get very good at all.

Do you think there's value in keeping limitations, and avoiding becoming an expert?

Yes. I can go get perfection. I can pay for perfection. If I want to record some songs, I can go to a, quote, real studio. That's kind of like buying a couch. Everyone knows what they're doing, there's going to be no mistakes. That sterility is sometimes not that fun after you've experienced the things that can happen to a song when something goes slightly wrong. All of those things are really exciting to me. It's like its own character.

You employ characters in your songs a fair bit, like Scuby and Mr. Natural. Do you design characters from scratch, or are you putting a different name on someone who already exists?

I don't really feel the need to create a new story or narrative per se. For me, it's more cathartic to disguise something that really happened, and leave the listener wondering who it's really about. I've heard other songwriters say, "My songs are not based in reality; this is not about me, this is not about anyone else, this is an invented thing." And I'm always like, "That's too bad. Because when I thought you were too insecure to actually say it straightforwardly, and that you were using your powers of creativity to turn it into a myth and put a different name on it, I understood what you meant. I could relate."

I know who Scuby is. Everyone knows who Scuby is, in a way. I see it as this romantic, hopefully universal language or tale that resonates and can't completely be described. That's why you can get lost in it. That's why it's a pleasurable escape, and a theme song for your own life. That's how I use songs.

We've talked a lot about obfuscation, but it seems important to you that there is connection and relating.

I think so. And, I think the fool is also the trickster. If I'm smiling with my eyes, but saying something menacing or dark, it's interesting, and it has your attention. We're complex creatures; so a song-and-dance-person in this day and age should reflect that.

Kyle Field Recommends:

Wearing a belt sometimes.

Writing ideas on my hand.

Not always eating breakfast.

The Book: On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are by Alan Watts

Places that are said to be haunted.

Name

Kyle Field

Vocation

musician and visual artist

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