

On letting rules make themselves



Musician and Writer Eli Winter discusses trusting his intuition, letting emotions be the guide for songs, and having mentors become peers

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As told to Mána Taylor, 2809 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Writing](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Collaboration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Mentorship](#), [Inspiration](#).

You consider yourself a self-taught musician. Let's start at the beginning, when did music appear in your life and how was the process of teaching yourself an instrument?

It's kind of always been there. I'm actually classically trained in piano and clarinet and I was part of a singing group as a very young kid, but I'm self-taught as a guitarist. That was a lot of gradually finding music that resonated and learning how to play as much as I could over years and years. A lot of learning by ear. Not learning from sheet music. When I moved to Chicago, I gradually started meeting more people over a period of years who I wanted to play with, at the same time as I started realizing that some of the music I was working on needed other people to join in order for the song to feel complete. When I started playing and started entertaining the idea of being a working musician, I never thought of collaboration entering the picture. I always imagined it as a solo endeavor, and generally a solo acoustic guitar endeavor. And in short, Chicago has changed that.

I wanted to ask about Chicago and the Chicago music scene! Was your album before this one the first time you've collaborated with other musicians on a record?

It was the first album with the band on the whole thing. But there's not a single solo song, per se.

Yeah, the Chicago music scene is so strong. I think part of what makes this album stand out from the self-titled album is that a lot of the music came together playing it live on tour with my dear trio bandmates. Sam Wagster plays pedal steel, Tyler Damon plays drums. And those are also the Chicagoans who play on the first band song that came out on an album of mine. So, by the time that we had recorded the music for this album, and the foundational parts of the music-pedal steel drums, bass, that sort of thing-the music that made it on the record by and large was music that we had played in concert as much as we could. And I'm lucky I get to play with people who I love who also are older than me. You know, Sam and Tyler are each like roughly 10 and 20 years older than I am. And I can't really believe that because they bring so much to their instruments in ways that I would be hard-pressed to imagine people in my age bracket-I'm about to turn 28-would be able to bring to the music.

Does that feel like mentorship or does it feel like full on collaboration? And does it fuel your creativity?

I think both. I'm definitely pretty uneasy with the idea of being a band leader in what might be a more traditional sense. I don't like to take solos, I don't like to play in a flashy manner. I think the way that I play prevents me from playing in a more superficially flashy or pyrotechnic fashion anyway, because the foundation of my playing comes from what people might call a folk fingerstyle guitar, which is a completely different toolkit from playing fast jazz guitar single-note leads. So the way that we each approach our instruments, we each come at it from somewhat of a sidelong way. Tyler is such a deep listener of so much music, including jazz, but is not per se trained as a jazz drummer. We each have these ways of playing our instruments that strike me as being pretty active, but also as a whole, the music feels pretty active. Going in to record

this music, I tend to think of it as being modular, in that we add more pieces to a certain song in a certain setting. Then the whole is filling up the same amount of space. How people are filling this whole changes a little bit from song to song. Because, as loosey goosey as this might sound, it's always just about finding out what the music wants.

Do you have intuition or do you have narratives you structure that become ideas of what you want the song to be like? Or as it comes to you, you have this sort of instinct of, "Oh, that's not what I want it to be?"

I think it's some of both. I think the only extent to which I could say there's a narrative is in terms of, does a given song produce in me an emotional impact? In short, do I choke up or cry at some point when I'm listening to a mix or something like that? Maybe that response will change at some point, but generally that's always the response I've looked for.

You look for the emotional?

Yeah. It might not be choking up. It might be feeling some kind of energy that is somewhat hard to describe. But it always connects to some kind of emotion. Or more than that, some kind of emotional ambiguity. Like a sense that there are a lot of different things happening and they could be difficult to untangle, but they're all there, even if you don't necessarily know what all those different pieces are. I think there was a time when I was seeking that and also seeking technical perfection. And now technical perfection seems not just asymptotic, but that it runs the risk of sacrificing the thing that could give other people meaning or an entry point to the music.

This album seems like it did come from a heavy place. You mentioned the death of your friend, jaimie branch in your liner notes, for instance. Is it difficult for grief to be a part of the music? Is that part of the emotion you're searching for?

Yeah, I mean, I think if it's not moving you, it's hard to justify it. Maybe that's just because I'm a sensitive B-O-I boi, but I tend to feel like most of the things that I take in-it could be a meal, it could be a book or a movie or something-most of the time, if something leaves an impact, it's leaving an emotional impact. And it seems like it's preferable then to try to tamp that down for the sake of something I wouldn't myself understand because it would be a different goal than I would have. And you know, sometimes I have to take breaks during shows. There's a song that we play in Jaimie Branch's memory, "Dayenu." That's usually a song that if any song in the set makes me take a break to collect myself after, it's usually that song, but that feels like how it wants to go, you know? Buttoning it up isn't going to help you.

It seems like you've really been able to let your intuition take the lead and since you also do some improv, I'm wondering if it took a while to get to this place where you are now, where you're accepting of everything that happens in the music?

The first recording sessions for this music, I kind of had to repair my relationship to playing guitar; which then happened again about a year later. I think [in the way that] intuition is natural to some degree, I had to teach myself how to trust it. I think partially as a function of some of the things I was trying to work through musically when this music started coming together and some of the things I was working through personally when this music started coming together, and also as it developed as well. But regardless, intuition is a pretty big guiding force.

What is the balance between improvisation and composing for you?

It's pretty porous. It's funny you ask. On the one hand, there's a song, "Cracking the Jaw," on this album, which is pretty much totally composed from my perspective. But my bandmates are more or less improvising around the structure that my music provides. And there's the title track, which my playing happens to provide a loose structure, but when we were recording what became that song, I was thinking about it more in terms of spontaneous composition rather than arriving with something fully composed.

I tend to think of improvisation as spontaneous composition anyway. I think partially in part because of my own toolkit and my own limitations. I don't feel like I'm all that good at playing fast. The guitars I play, I often have them set up in ways that in short are just kind of hard to play. I use heavy strings and use all these modal tunings that sometimes are kind of odd.

I've worked with people who are really good at understanding what a song wants, and then they can either have me bring it out or they can bring it out themselves. I trust my ability to help guide something in a certain direction that might be. I think particularly in a live setting.

There's a William T. Vollmann quote, I really want to dig it up, but he said something to the effect of, "At least my mistakes are my mistakes." And the idea that he's a writer and he had the idea that no artwork will ever be perfect in some quantifiable objective measure. I think it informs a lot of how I've approached that more recently.

I wanted to go back to your writing, because your music is mostly instrumental. I know we've talked about you wanting to sing at some point, but I'm curious about your writing and if those are separate things for you or if you ever see them interweaving.

I've actually demoed a singing record that I hope will come out with a good home someday. I realized that I think a lot of what my guitar playing is doing, or the instrumental work that I'm doing, regardless of what instrument it is, is filling the role of a vocal line. I think a lot of the music that I resonate with in terms of instrumental music tends to have a more active quality. The sense of there being a narrative. I think it comes from the fact that whatever music I'm playing in a group context or on my own, it fills the same function as if there were a singer there.

I started playing instrumental music in part because I was a shy singer. I shared a room and my poor brother would listen to me practicing guitar with headphones on, and I just did not want to sing. Sometimes I would sing quietly on my bed at home if I were the only person home, and only then until somebody else got home. But I think it bears on how I approach this music, even though it seems different on some level. The same way that I have a creative nonfiction degree and the kinds of things I was exposed to in terms of how to structure a given thing and figuring out what kind of narrative something wants.

What path led you to where you are today?

This feels sappy, but it feels worth mentioning, that a lot of the things that have happened musically and a lot of the work that I've done, it often seemed that various things would seem insurmountable, and then one way or another, they worked out. And the process in my experience, though I know it's not the case for everyone, has been pretty organic, pretty slow and steady.

I would just hope that speaking as someone who was once a younger person reading The Creative Independent interviews, thinking, "Oh man, maybe I can be like that person someday, doing something like what this person is doing." Coming from no meaningful musical training in my main instrument and no deep financial pockets or things of that nature, weird, "nepo baby" style connections...Obviously there are a lot of different factors at play that are important to be mindful of, especially with the whole fascism issue going on and the, we call it an omni-crisis, I guess, politically. But I can't help but think that the sorts of things that I'm doing are not out of anybody's reach. And if anyone reading this ever has a question about that sort of thing, they can hit me up any time.

Do you feel like things were accessible to you when you were starting out?

I reached out to a lot of people on the internet and wrote them emails saying something like, "Hey, I'm Eli, I'm 17. I want to do what you do when I grow up. Can we be friends?" and just enough of those people wrote back in kind with some kind of encouragement. And now those people are continuing to, by and large, blaze their creative trails. Some at progressively larger scales, and for others, it's different. But either way, just doing whatever their thing happens to be at a given time. I grew up in Houston, and even just meeting a few people who had some

sense of the same musical interests felt impossible. It's a surprise that I started meeting people in Houston who I felt like I could work with on some level after I moved away. But through that, I started reaching out to people and I would wait for these people's replies in my inbox and open them terrified that they'd say, "What are you doing, kid? Go away. You're 17 and I'm about to go on tour in Germany," or something. And of course it never happened because... Well, I suppose that I don't even need to explain it, but I had that fear.

But that was really just about building some kind of community, whether it's on your own or with other people. And, of course, Chicago has so much of that infrastructure built in already and this music really benefits from that. But also sort of to the earlier point, it happens in so many different ways; I just tend to feel like there's never any harm in reaching out.

Eli Winter recommends:

I just stumbled on the Yiddish concept of *doikayt*, which comes from the Jewish socialist Bund movement. It translates both to "hereness" and to "fight for freedom and safety in the places where they lived, in defiance of everyone who wanted them dead"—exactly.

Here are some things that have recently helped me find home in the present moment. Hope they help you, too.

listening: Gary Burton's quartet playing "Vox Humana" and Don Pullen's song "Ode to Life"

reading: Susan Alcorn's essay "Texas: Three Days and Two Nights," Tory Dent (her poetry and her essay "The Deferred Dream"), Joy Williams (The Changeling: "She crept beneath Walker's arm and watched in safety, like an arboreal creature in a midnight nest"—!)

in Houston on a Monday afternoon: get tacos from Tierra Caliente (God in a taco truck), go to the Menil Collection (free art museum, but there's no God here, just oil money), and get a slice of cake from Empire Cafe—it's as big as your face, you get three meals out of it, and on Mondays it's half off (God in a price).

concertgoing: Erez Dessel, Chicago pianist with a fondness for tiny musical instruments. Once, he played five different sets of music in seven nights. I caught four of them, they were all great. I last saw him play songs in a duo with Gerrit Hatcher, a great saxophonist, and possibly the loudest—I went to the show straight from the plane after a long travel day with an early wake-up and little food—and, as fried as I was, less expressive than usual, the music still made me bust out laughing. I've been relearning to do things like that, that is, to let oneself share an expression instead of holding the expression back (or translating it into music). Erez' shows help. As I write this I'm laughing out loud because I'm thinking of last year's incredible (yes) Revolutionary War chiptunes set. As you can imagine, Erez' playing—whether improvising, melodicizing or accompanying—often strikes me not just as nourishing and affecting, but sometimes confounding, oblique, downright baffling. And that's often the best part. So I guess I'm also recommending to spend time with something you don't understand and dig into it. Or as Erez might say, *tres tres boku boku vous ette swing*.

send postcards and letters to people you love when you're traveling; tell them anytime, without a second thought; life is too short not to share love, however it moves, or to connect vulnerability or sensitivity with shame

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