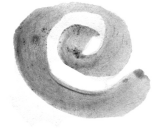


# On finding reasons to be grateful



Musician Ben Kweller discusses leaning on his community in the aftermath of tragedy, art-making as a constant, and toggling between the emotional and the logical.

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As told to Daisy Woodward, 2532 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Family](#), [Beginnings](#), [Adversity](#), [Collaboration](#).

**Cover the Mirrors is a beautiful, deeply personal album. Your openness about losing [your teenage son] Dorian, and your navigation of that has been really inspiring. You've spoken about how music and creativity has helped you find a way to "walk through the fire of heartbreaking grief with intention and purpose," which is a subject I'd love to talk to you about.**

Amidst all the craziness and feeling like my life was over the night that Dorian died, music is somehow keeping me going. I feel so fortunate that I have it in me, because otherwise I don't know what I would do. It's so strange, the thought of, *how do you keep going?* People ask me all the time. I was in New Jersey the other night, doing a festival with Bleachers, and someone was like, "How are you still standing?" I'm like, "I don't know, but I think it's the music!" So I really *do* know. I've been able to channel all of my feelings into this work. I feel lucky, even though I've been through horrible shit. There's always something to be grateful for, as crazy as that sounds. Having gratitude... it's hard to find, but it's there.

**At what point did you find yourself turning to music again after Dorian died?**

When Dorian died, we didn't listen to music for a few days—maybe even a week or two—which is really odd because we're such a musical household. But we were just music-less. Everything was just so sad. But I guess maybe a month later, I went to Dorian's bedroom and sat on his bed. It's still the same as he left it. Actually, it has sort of become the music room in our house. I'll go in there and play on his piano or guitar, or [my younger son] Judah will go in there after school and play guitar. So I went in there and started playing guitar, and I was instantly reminded of the thing that I've always known since I was a little boy: that music is magic. It's been the one constant in my life. I don't have a lot of constants. My life has been pretty much chaos since I was a teenager, and I jumped into this life of rock and roll. My band Radish signed a record deal when I was 15, so I dropped out of high school, which I was so happy about—like, "Fuck yeah, I'm just going to go play music!"—and I was living the dream at 16 years old. I never looked back, and somehow I'm still here doing it today.

**So the familiarity of music provided solace?**

What I realized sitting on Dorian's bed was that my best friend is music—and songwriting, and pulling lyrics out of the air. You know how it is, as a creator. It's really hard to explain what we do. But writing a song, you're putting together a puzzle with pieces that don't even exist yet. It's this real bizarre, mysterious process, but it's a process that I've known my whole life. Luckily, the music just started flowing out of me. I don't know how else to say it, but it did. And I was thinking about Dorian every step of the way, and all the shit I was going through, and that eventually turned into this album.

**Was it at all intimidating, either making the album or the thought of putting it out there?**

It wasn't intimidating because it's just part of who I am. I write songs throughout the year, and then at some point I'll go in the studio and record them. Then that's an album, and I'll put it out and do all the other stuff surrounding that. Unfortunately, musicians in the year 2025 have to do videos and "content"—the worst word ever—and all the social media stuff. I'm used to that pattern so, again, I just kind of leaned into it. Like, "Let me do something that I can control," because I was completely out of control.

When you lose someone out of the blue, it's chaos. I read a quote the other day: "We can't control what happens. All we can control is how we react." And so for me, it was: make music. That summer of 2023, I realized I had six or seven songs completed and half of them felt like part of an album. That's when I realized that I was making a specific-sounding album, and it eventually was called *Cover the Mirrors*. I didn't name it until the album was done.

**How did you come up with the title?**

We had a big sheet of paper in the studio where anyone that visited would write potential titles, because it was a hard album to name. Then one day my friend Dan called and was like, "Dude, what about *Cover the Mirrors*?" Because we were talking about all these different ways to grieve, and reading about traditions from all different cultures. We're naturally sentimental creatures. We really love the ones that leave us, and we don't have explanations for it, so civilizations have created different ways to deal with that. One of the traditions from the Jewish faith is that the first week someone dies, you cover all the mirrors in your house because you're not supposed to look at yourself. You have to get rid of your ego. You are nothing, and all that matters is thinking of the person that left us—complete devotion to the memory of this person. It's really a beautiful tradition in the times that we live in, of our selfish Instagram culture of, "Look at me. Look at what I'm eating." Who gives a shit what you're eating? I feel like this album, in a lot of ways, is kind of a rebellion against modern society, which is very lacking in humility.

**You often collaborate with other musicians, and that's especially true of this album, which has songs with Waxahatchee, MJ Lenderman, The Flaming Lips, lots of friends and fellow artists. What was the impetus behind bringing them into the process?**

It's the most collaborative work I've ever done, and that also is a reflection of what happened to us immediately after Dorian died. Our community here in Dripping Springs, and in Austin, just came and wrapped their arms around us. It's just so wild to think about how important community is, especially in times of hardship. There's a parallel with rock and roll. I grew up north of Dallas, and as soon as I got my driver's license, I would go to Dallas every weekend and see live music. Radish would play gigs, and I started meeting other artists. You build a scene. The punk rock life of posting flyers for your friends' bands, going to shows, playing shows—it's all about community.

I was thinking a lot about our community of friends and families, and as the album started to take shape, I heard different voices in my head. The first one was on the song "Dollar Store." It reminded me of something like the Pixies—I heard this high-octave female vocal—so I texted a demo of the song over to Katie [Crutchfield], and she was like, "Oh my god, this is awesome." That led to Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips—I sent him the song "Killer Bee"—and so on.

**It's beautiful that you were able to embrace that sense of community so openly.**

Maybe if you hear that an artist lost their son, you'd expect that that artist is going to go into a room with a recorder and record an album all by themselves, because it's a process of solitude. But for whatever reason—it wasn't intentional—my reaction to all of this was the opposite: *No, I'm not going to lock myself away, and make something brooding and solo. I'm going to embrace all of the people who are still here.* That's the thing, the album is all about the living as much as it is about Dorian.

**Dorian was also a really talented musician and songwriter, working under the name ZEV, and from what I've read,**

**he had a huge amount of creative zeal and excitement.**

Yes. He was the ultimate young artist, who never knew pain or true heartbreak. He was just at the beginning of that learning—how to create music and find your voice through song—and it was wild to see it because it was like looking in the mirror. He reminded me of me at that same time in my life. So now he's a complete inspiration, because it's really easy as an artist to lose sight of what we fell in love with in the beginning. [It is] hard to keep that drive and determination, especially as you get older and you have to deal with bills and mortgages and relationships—just adulting. And as an artist, it's hard when you're tethered to so much reality. It's such a pain in the ass because it really stifles the creative process. So I've tried to be more like Dorian and get back to what it was to be me when I was his age. It's a whole weird vibe right now that I'm living in, as an artist.

**When you released *Cover the Mirrors*, you wrote, "It's hard not to focus on everything I've lost and in the depths of my sorrow, I realized that something was gained. I can only describe it as an additional layer in the spectrum of understanding. My highs are higher and my lows are lower. My love is deeper and my calling is stronger." This aspect of grief is rarely spoken about publicly, and I found that moving.**

That's the thing, it has totally flipped my perspective on life, and appreciation, and gratitude—which is the opposite of what you'd expect, because you'd think it would just cement the idea that, "Now that he's gone, nothing matters." You have those feelings, naturally. You have all the feelings—it's wild. But in the end, it really is like an awakening; it opens your eyes even more. When something good happens, you really appreciate it.

**Did you notice that this sense of your highs being higher and your lows being lower affected how you wrote this album?**

Yes, totally. The song "Letter to Agony" is one of the darker songs I've ever written. When I was writing that, I was in the "hating the world" phase—just complete despair. But the song "Oh, Dorian"—the song directly about him, the last song I wrote for the album—is joyful. And he was a joyful person, so actually it's exactly what it needs to be because that's who he was.

**How much were you thinking about that balance between dark and light?**

Some of that process goes back to my own tradition of making albums and writing songs. Sometimes I'd have a day where I would be completely detached from thinking about my loss of Dorian, where I would go to the basics of, "Do I like this song? Is it saying something? Is it cool? Does it fit with the other songs?" You go back and forth from the emotional to the logical because sometimes you've got to put on your artist hat, and [zoom in on] the technical stuff. Like, "Here's a list of songs. This one sucks and it doesn't deserve to be on the album." There were days where I would be putting together an album as if it was any other album I've made. Again, luckily, I knew that framework really well so there was comfort in the fact that I've always had this tool, this way of making art. But some days I really just thought about him, and how the body of work related to him. I think it's a mix between the nuts and bolts of making an album and the meaning of the album you're creating.

**Is that how you've always worked?**

I think so, because, as a listener, I'm such a lover of pop music. I don't mean the genre—I mean pop music as in music that gets to the point. *Don't bore us, get to the chorus!* I'm that guy. I love that shit. So I've always balanced the concept of what I want to do as an artist with [asking,] what's it going to be like on the other side for the person receiving the music?

**What would be your advice for striking that balance?**

It's a good question because I don't know if it's quite 50-50. I think it's definitely more in favor of you having to express yourself as an artist, and what the listener receives is probably less than that. But it's close to 50. I've often said to myself, "I sure would be happy if I just sat on the bed and wrote songs all day. I wouldn't make any money. I wouldn't be able to pay bills. I'd have to probably live in a tent. But I'd be

satisfied. I'd be creating." But touring now for the new album—being on stage since Dorian died, and seeing my fans and reconnecting with them—I did realize that actually, that satisfaction of writing songs is only half the puzzle. For me, it's like a handshake. I have to extend my hand with the song, but having someone on the other end receive it is just as meaningful to me.

**I think that's what fans of your work feel about it: it reaches them.**

Coming back to advice, I would say that no matter what, you have to prioritize what you are trying to do as an artist first. You can't give a shit about the listener in the beginning. You need to just think about what you're trying to do... Making art is personal. If you find people that become fans of what you do, that's the dream and that's amazing—but if you're creating something that doesn't have integrity and doesn't reflect who you are, and you go and get fans of that product, what are you putting out there? Is it real? I don't know. I'm all about authenticity. I feel like my favorite artists to listen to are quintessential authentic people like Neil Young or Tom Petty or Kurt Cobain. When you listen to their music, you feel like you're hanging out with them, or at least that you understand who their souls are. That's what I like, and so I think I've strived to do that as well, as an artist. Anyway, that's just a strange tangent, but it's a great thing to think about as a creator: the importance of making your art, and keeping true to you versus having listeners on the other end of it.

**Ben Kweller recommends:**

"How I Am" by ZEV

Rafael Nadal

"Hot Pink Mess" by Modern Love Child

Lighten Up! A Complete Handbook for Light and Ultralight Backpacking by Don Ladigin

1959 Topps baseball cards

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Vocation

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