

On trying to become a better human



Musician Bill Callahan discusses what makes a good performance, working with his friends, and the tightrope walk of a changing music industry.

February 24, 2026 -

As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2041 words.

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The last time you spoke with The Creative Independent, in 2019, you named one of the biggest hurdles of your musical life: learning how to be a father and husband while getting back to "the songwriter guy that you used to be." Where are you at in this process?

As far as a life-work balance, my scales are pretty much as balanced as they're ever going to be. There's only the occasional thing—a kid gets sick or something, so you're like, "Oh, I was going to do something else today, but I guess I have to just be making snacks and running them upstairs constantly." Once I got back in the groove, I stayed in the groove. Going through this experience of being a father, I learned a lot about creativity.

A lot of people, me included, only have so many creative hours inside them every day. It's a little thing that gets replenished every day—but just a certain amount, like a jug of water. That's your water for the day. No matter how much you wish there was more water in that pitcher, it's just like, "No, it's empty, but it'll probably be full tomorrow if you do your other responsibilities and take care of yourself." I learned and accepted that creative work is a finite thing. I used to treat it like an infinite fountain that I would just bathe in for 14 hours a day, but then I realized I'm just sitting in it. There's no new water coming out of the fountain.

Has your relationship with productivity changed?

Since I was about 19 or 20, when I decided to commit to a life of art, I knew that everything went into the pot. It always seemed like just sitting and trying to do work was most important. I definitely realize now that going for a walk, going to see another band, listening to a record, talking to a friend—it's all equally important. Thinking of the sitting down part as the last thing on your list instead of the first thing, that's a big change for me. All that stuff, it's welling up inside you; it's getting deeper and deeper within your subconscious, and your conscious mind is processing things and experiencing things. So whenever you do get to pull that little plug out and sit down, it's all going to come out. You're not going to miss anything by like, "Oh, I wish I could have..." Maybe you only have three days a week that your lifestyle or job allows you to [make art]. Or maybe just on the weekends. It all gets stored up and comes out when you let it.

In an interview you mentioned your superpower is in your flexibility of thought, being willing to be challenged and being proved wrong. How does this impact your personal or your creative life?

I think that mindset especially helps being a father. You never know when your kid's going to be sick and your whole day is going to be completely opposite of what you pictured as you were falling asleep the night before.

That kind of flexibility is good. I've always felt like I was kind of a late bloomer. In high school, I didn't have a huge social life. I had a very internal life. I was just listening to music and fantasizing about what my life might be like when I get older and have the power that you don't have when you're a kid to steer your life. You're at the whim of the school system and your parents and not having a job. I was always looking forward to that time in my life when I would be in charge. Once I was old enough to have a job and I saved up some money and I just started moving all around the country, I was curious about what's it like in this state and this state. And I'd never been to California, so I moved out there, and tried different cities.

Some of your adaptability was built in.

Yeah. It's only compounded these days. The more that I read about our brains and neural pathways and how much we write our own story... With some discipline and habit, we can choose how we think and how we see the world. And that's the most important thing, I think, for humans to realize and to put into practice.

How did it feel when you first began collaborating with other musicians?

I started out super guarded with my work, even going so far as to record at home and be in control of the tape machine. I didn't want anybody to divert my path. I didn't trust anybody to understand what I wanted. I was very protective and had to do everything myself. When I started recording with Jim O'Rourke with Knock Knock and Red Apple Falls, that was probably the first time that I let anybody throw ideas down. He did it in a very respectful way. I always loved what he did because he's such an amazing musician. Then, later, I didn't put much thought into who I brought on tour with me. I just wanted bodies there because I thought I was very focused on what really matters: the lyrics and getting the lyrics across audibly to people. I didn't place much importance on the rest of what was behind it, which, in retrospect, is a mistake. Now I have a real band that I think I can trust. They're from the inception of the music I like.

Is there trust because you also have strong friendships within the group?

The friendship part just makes it fun. There's some level of comfortability with a friend so you can give them your wild ideas and then they can feel comfortable to be like, "Here's my wild idea." It is very nice that I love those guys and that we're friends, but I think really, it's their skills that got us to this place. It's just a bonus that we like each other.

There's been a lot written about the challenge of playing with Willie Nelson due to his style of phrasing. Are your band members in a similar position?

Yeah. That's the secret to playing with me: just listen to the voice. The voice is the band leader and you just have to follow that. There's some people that can't do that. There's some people that can, and find it fun because it just keeps them on their toes, and they don't just turn into a tape recording of themselves. They're thinking and playing at the same time.

With your new album, you set out to make a "living room record." Tell me a bit about this.

I think all records were living room records until about the late '60s, when technology started to change. Especially in the '70s, when things got really smooth and the idea of isolated recording became a thing. Everybody's in isolation and there's no, "Oh, we'll add a room sound later with this reverb." I do like that sound. Fleetwood Mac is a prime example. I love the way that sounds and I think I've used that technique a lot in the past. For this record, I'd been listening to Chuck Berry and Michael Hurley.

Michael Hurley is singing with his mouth and playing with his fingers, but I can kind of feel his whole body, all of his organs and his hair, can hear him blinking. I feel like there's something bodily about it as opposed to the '70s, where it's all cerebral. It's implanted in your brain, and it's lovely, and it's very transporting into other realms. But listening to Michael Hurley, I was like, "This is so nice." It's just so real-sounding and human.

You also revisited and brought new life to some older material. What did that look and feel like?

"Stepping Out For Air" was started about 15 years ago. I might've thought it was finished back then, but I updated it for the record and added a couple of new verses. There's probably a reason I wasn't ready or the song wasn't ready to be released yet. I added new stuff while I was writing the rest of the material. It's kind of half old and half new. A song is only born when you release it. Before that, it's just a wish in a bucket. It hasn't been around until people hear it.

How do you prepare for studio time?

I'll book time before I'm ready. I try to look six months out or something. When I'm about 60% or 70% finished with writing, I'll feel confident about setting up some time. When I actually hit the studio, I'm 100% ready. I always read about bands that are like, "We didn't have any material, but we got together and we just started." I can't imagine doing that. Why not just do the work at home first? If you had a bottomless pit of money, I guess it could be fun. I got it ingrained in me to be very frugal from the start, because I realized the less I spend, the more chance I'll have of breaking even. All the lyrics are always 100% done.

How do you know you got the take?

A good performance is when you can hear that people are listening to each other. That's always what I look for. You can hear them listening to what someone else is playing. They are responding to that, or stepping back to let that other person shine through. It's kind of a weak spot of mine, picking the best take. On this record, there were a lot of first takes, some second. There might've been a couple songs where we did three or four takes.

I try to eliminate that difficulty for me by just getting it. The less takes you have, the easier it is to pick. When we have three or four takes, my brain starts to shut down. "Let's listen to these four almost identical songs and pick the one you like best." When you're on the third one, you're like, "Well, what?" You can't remember the first one. I try to have someone in the studio that is good at that.

How has it felt to grow alongside Drag City Records for all these years?

It's nothing short of miraculous that we found each other. Like you said, we grew together, which I think helped a lot, like grafting a tree. We grew together, but we also *grew together*. I basically feel like it's my record label that I run, kind of. Every day is a tightrope walk across the changing music industry. They are definitely under restrictions. There's a lot less money coming in, so they can't have all the employees they would like to have to do the work that they want to do. They're managing to survive, which means I'm managing to survive. It's like we're really codependent. I probably take it for granted because we've been working together so long, but I do try to express gratitude to them.

What's bringing you joy and hope in 2026?

Just being alive, basically. I'm doing a lot of work on myself as a human. Early on in my music career, it was fun to be a bad boy or explore negative things just to document them or catalog weird behavior. Being married or having a partner, it's holding your feet to the fire because you have this constant mirror. I'm just seriously trying to become a better human, which I never thought about much until the past couple years. I was more just along for the ride, wherever it took me, but now I feel like maybe I can steer where I'm going.

Jeffrey Silverstein's favorite Bill Callahan songs:

"Stepping Out for Air"

"What Comes After Certainty"

"Riding for the Feeling"

"Bowevil"

"Keep Some Steady Friends Around"

Name

Bill Callahan

Vocation

musician

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