

On working with whatever happens to be around you



Deerhunter's Bradford Cox's advice for young musicians, why first thoughts are the best thoughts, and why taking things to the "next level" should never be your goal.

February 22, 2019 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3009 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Production](#), [Time management](#).

Are you someone who is always working on music in some capacity?

Well, if not music then a visual artwork around music, or some kind of unrelated visual art or design, or just working a lot on personal experiments in film and stuff like that. Then writing a lot. I do a lot of concrete poetry, visual poetry, typewriter art... So, I'm definitely always immersed in aesthetic concerns.

Did you always have a sense that you would be a musician or an artist of some kind?

Not really. I just knew I'd be a creator of work, of stories. I thought I would be a filmmaker, but filmmaking is a more privileged discipline. It seems to me like there's very few Harmony Korines around now. Most filmmakers now probably went to film school. I dropped out of high school. You can be in a band and nobody looks at your CV. Whereas a filmmaker has to really have a foot in the door to enter that world, which just feels impossible for an independent person nowadays. I still view my musical pursuits as a form of filmmaking, weirdly. I view every album like a film, through a screenplay, storyboards, shots that I have in my mind, blocking, and performance.

When you go in to make a new record, is it important to try and do things differently each time, to change up your process?

We always do everything differently because there's no hope of replicating any kind of past lesson learned, since there is always a certain kind of chaos involved. It just oscillates around us. No matter how hard we try to be efficient—and we use that word, me and [drummer] Moses [Archuleta] especially. We're like, "We're going to do this efficiently"—no matter how we try to compartmentalize different elements of the process, it just doesn't matter. We try to use big words like synergy and synergistic. We say things like, "Let's have this inform this and this process, it will be so easy to do..."

But at the end of the day, it ends up being that everything seems virtually impossible. We always end up three days late with nothing to show for it and we're constantly giving each other pep talks about how we can possibly get through this project. It's like that book about Fassbinder, *Chaos as Usual*. I've adapted that for Deerhunter. It really is just like chaos as usual.

It's interesting how often making something new can feel like reinventing the wheel every time you do it, even if you've done it many, many times before.

I don't tend to have that problem with work that is solitary, like writing. I feel that whatever you write, once it's collated and edited into a narrative of some kind—whether it's abstract, geometric, linear, emotional, or whatever—it is the work. Whether it's good or not is never something that bothers me.

I sit in front of a typewriter and I type. A lot of times I'm like, "Oh, this is all just an exercise in physical typing. It's nothing." I just let it happen, but I never throw anything away. I let it sit. I just throw it into a pile. And then I come back a couple of weeks later. It's the same thing with my tapes and my discs or whatever you call it, my files—the memory cards on the 8-track. I record songs. I don't think about them anymore. I put them away. I just make an effort. I don't immediately think of it as, "This is a piece of work that needs to be analyzed and improved upon and refined." I just make stuff. I'm not lazy, because there's a lot of constant work, but my attitude towards the work when it's done is very dismissive. And I don't analyze it very much.

And then, I come back later and I'm usually surprised by its potency or quality. Every single song on this album is the same thing. Every single song on this album, I had the same, "That's not very good. Oh, I was just doing an exercise. I was just trying to get the harpsichord to sound right." But then I go back and listen to it, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this... Wow. This is really something."

Are you a hoarder of ideas?

I'm a hoarder of everything. I prefer to use the term nesting. My nest is made of little saliva-coated fabric pieces of ideas. The whole house is like a nest. I've been working on ceramics, so the kitchen is crazy right now. I'm always doing stuff. I'm always messing with things.

If someone wanted to create a small, designated space in their home to record music, what would you suggest that they need? What is essential?

That's very difficult to answer. People always say, "Oh, buy this D83906, but don't get the dual version. Get the single version because it has a better RAM recovery rate, blah, blah, blah." I don't think about any of that shit.

I try to keep music as tactile as possible. And so, the only thing I would say is don't base your studio around your computer, but also don't base it around some stupid, anachronistic analog system that's hard to keep up because you'll never be able to. Making music will become a chore or something that you have to set up for.

The best thing I have ever had happen to me was getting this simple little 8-track recorder. None of our albums in the past eight years or longer could have been possible without this digital 8-track that runs on batteries. It's so simple to use that it removes any need for thought. There's no EQ. You just plug in and you get a relatively decent sound from something within two seconds. And you just go. It's more about your ideas and less about your process.

Do you find that your process for making things has changed radically over the years? Or is it something that's always changing?

Not really. It's a natural change. My creative process is just like building a nest. And I'm a very long bird. I just go in and collect little pieces of newspaper, and I'm like, "How will this fit into my nest?" Or, "Oh, that bottle cap would make a really good lamp for my nest." I'm just going around and pecking around parking lots, the giant parking lot of the world, and I'm a pigeon. Do pigeons nest?

Does the experience of playing live feel like a creative act?

Oh, there is nothing better. I love it. I hate nothing more than the doldrums of actual traveling, though. Traveling is often very stressful for me. I also cannot stand the 30 minutes leading up to the show. Not because of the nervousness, but because I want to get up there and play. I want to play because I'm eager. I don't like sitting. I hate backstage. I never go backstage. I generally have to walk through the backstage to get to the stage and that's my experience. I don't drink. I don't hang out. I just go to a bookstore or gallery or something

nearby. Maybe an arts supply store, because I'm always drawing or painting in the bus or making some kind of visual stuff.

Backstage is to me like the break room of a large retail store or something like that, which I spent a lot of time in when I was growing up, because I had a job at age 14. The break room at Wendy's, I've been there. Many hours have I spent at the break room of Old Navy in Marietta, Georgia, in 1997. If I can avoid that I'd like to. I'd much rather be at a library. Oh my god. If every backstage were a library.

How do you keep from going crazy on tour?

There's nothing I enjoy more in life than aesthetic meditation. When I walk through the city, I'm looking for color, I'm looking for light, I'm looking for text, I'm looking for form and shadow. Not so much rhythm and music anymore, because I find the rhythm and music of present day is a little bit like LED lighting, you know? I mean, sirens will never change and car horns will always be car horns.

One thing I started doing is wearing the air... what do you call them, AirPods? Airbuds? My phone broke, so I went to this Apple store. And the guy's like, "You should try these." And I'm like, "I don't put things in my ears. I like to actually walk around in the world." And he's like, "Yeah, but you should try them." I'm like, "Wow. Okay. Confidence man." So, I got them and he was right. Now I plug my ears up like everybody else, and I'm walking around and above all this is Thelonious Monk. I'm not paying attention to the sounds of the city or the reality of my time. I'd rather shut myself off.

Do young musicians or other bands ever ask you for advice?

Yes. First of all, I'm honored that they ask me for advice, but a lot of times I realize it's because they see me as being a financially set person. And they know that I grew up poor from reading about me or they know my family's struggled a lot. They know that my life is not paid for by some kind of inherited wealth. It's only paid for by what I've done. And so, they want to know how they can make their life like that. And I mean, it's very disappointing when I answer them honestly.

Things like "live someplace less expensive," and "save your money?"

Yeah. Live someplace where what you do is not just a speck of the static. Live someplace that you can afford. Become asexual, you'll save time and money. Get a dog. That is all the companionship you need. Or a cat.

If you're asking for "how to make it," then you should probably ask someone else. We were never an aspirational group. We never aspired to any of this. We aspired to open for the Fall once. It was like an art project. The idea that it went on to become my adulthood, that I made a good living doing it... it's all very disorienting in a lot of ways when I stop to think about it. When I don't stop to think about it, I just keep living.

So no advice for someone who just wants to try recording some songs?

Arthur Russell called an album *First Thought Best Thought*. I think that's a great phrase and a great way to think about making things.

I guess a lot of people are really asking how to make their work more marketable. They're not really asking how to make their work better, because it would be weird if you were in a position to make a record, but you didn't feel you already knew what the record should be. I've never had any question of what a record should be. I would never need advice from anyone about that. When I play a record with somebody and I ask her opinion, usually it's just because I want to know if the EQ is hitting them too bright. Certainly not about content.

I mean, I always find it interesting how people relate to the content or how they analyze it, but it has no effect on the content itself. I don't know what I'm saying or meaning to say a lot of the time. I am analyzing it in real time just as the listener is. And my opinion of it is I might say, "Oh, I really don't like what I think

that song is about," but someone else might like it. But whatever it is, it's my work and the group's work.

People often ask writers, "How do you work? Do you wake up in the morning and work for three hours? Do you use a certain kind of pencil? Do you have rituals around what you do?" As if by hearing people talk about those things, it's like unlocking a key or something.

I know, but occasionally that kind of stuff can be inspiring. And in its most useful capacity that kind of thing can inspire you to not want to copy their pencil, but to find *your* pencil. If I were to say, "What kind of pencil do you use to write?" I would also then ask you, "And why did you choose that pencil?" Maybe they choose a certain pencil because they have a heavy hand and push down really hard when they write, and this particular pencil is lightweight. You really have to ask, "Well, how do *I* write? And what should *I* look for in a pencil?"

Not to negate all that, but my advice has always been to work with whatever's around you. The best way to make a record is to walk into a room, clap your hands, and see how things sound. You don't overthink about what you *have* to achieve. Just think about what you *can* achieve. If the xylophone isn't in the corner for some reason, ok, there's a snare drum over there or maybe there's a toy trumpet. Use that. A good artist can make a great piece of work with anything. Be creative.

One of the biggest and most abrasive qualities of young creatives that I've met and dealt with is their constant invocation of the phrase "next level." "We've got to do something next level. We've got to take things to the next level." Do you think John Cage thought he was taking music to the next level? I don't think so. I think he was taking it out of the realm of levels. Do you think Tarkovsky was saying, "Oh, we got to make this next level. I'll tell you what, how about this 12-minute tracking shot. We got to make this next level." When I think of next level, I think of Nike. I think of Tumblr. I think of competition. I think of corporate images. Just a parade of images, each one designed to have more impact than the last image. I think true art has no interest in what came before or after it. The next level is completely... it's non-existent.

Bradford Cox recommends:

Evergreen sources of inspiration. Number one, William Faulkner and the structure of his sentences. I find musicality there. The first lines of his novels always seem to come in the middle of a thought. William Faulkner. There is a reason I named my dog after him. I also think that the man had problems, as we all do. I'm bypassing all that right now. So, I find this grace in Faulkner's writing. I often will just pick up a book and be able to run over a page and read a beautifully crafted sentence, and put the book back down. I would consider him a perennial source of inspiration.

David Bowie doesn't require much explanation. But much in the same way as Faulkner, I don't like to sit there and think too much about a specific record. I like to open to a random page of Bowie's career, like a song from *Lodger*, and take a little bit of inspiration. It's almost like a deck of cards. What can I take from this experiment he did? And Bowie never gave up and he continued and he endured, to cop a phrase from Faulkner. He endured. They endured.

This isn't a list of my heroes. This is a list of things I go to when I need a breath, a mental breath.Bo Diddley. It's been that way for years. If I'm just really rotten, if I'm really low, I listen to him. If you can't improve your condition slightly with a few Bo Diddley songs, I mean, you need to see a doctor. He was a great example of what good art can do for humanity. I know that that sounds incredibly trite, but I mean, it was such sincerity that's so focused and poignant and please don't let him be misunderstood. He was like a great grandfather that teaches you how to tie a tie or something. A source of weird sonic and cosmic wisdom. And a source of antidepressant technology.

David Berman. I think he's one of the absolute greatest writers and I've always found his writing to be so thrilling to read. I'm endlessly impressed by his techniques.

Let's think of a non-human inspiration. I mean, I'm going to have to say my dog. And playing the drums. And typing. And color pigment. Water color paints, good ink, good paper. One of the biggest inspirations I've ever found in anything, and it always throws me, is a beautiful blank sheet of very fine paper. Oh! I just adore a good piece of paper. And light bulbs. I just love ceramic colored light bulbs. Yeah. I'm a huge light bulb collector. I have old light bulbs. I have Soviet light bulbs. And old color charts. I love those.

I think that all of those are things are very useful in a musical context. When I write lyrics out to sing in a studio, I always use fine paper to write them down. I know this sounds maybe very bourgeoisie, but I don't actually care because it's my process, not someone else's. I use Arches, a fine French paper that's hand laid. And I find that it makes the words and act of writing the words just feel more special. If I really want to really meditate on words, I find a great paper really helps. I use a technical pen to write them.

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Vocation

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