

On using art to cope with difficult times



Mastodon's Brann Dailor on rediscovering old talents, "creative monogamy," and why it helped him to draw one clown per day for 101 days.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2331 words.

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Everyone is dealing with the pandemic and the lockdown in different ways. From what I can gather from our recent conversations, it seems like you've been sticking to a schedule and exercising regularly. Is that helping you deal with the situation?

Yeah, I think a lot of people have had to find a new routine because their old routine was interrupted. I feel like I've gone through a couple of different phases of routine so far. When it was lockdown-lockdown, I started drawing those clowns. That kind of gave me an anchor for every day. I was like, "Okay, I have to do this," and I drew a clown everyday for 101 days straight. They would take me anywhere from three hours to eight hours to do. That was a pretty good chunk of time that would be dedicated to the daily clown, and then it would take me an hour to text them to each person that was on the daily clown mailing list, if you will, because I don't have an Instagram account and I don't have any social media.

Why clowns?

Over the last 10 or 15 years, I've had... I'm not going to call it an obsession, but my love for clowns and the aesthetics of the clown has only increased. As far as drawing, you can do so much with them. So I just clowned everything. I had a kung-fu clown, a clown driving a car flipping off a mountain—the Fuck The World clown—I made an airplane into a clown, a Steve Harvey clown, a Richard Simmons clown... anything and everything is clown-able, come to find out. I can't really think of anything else that can be moved around in such a way. I'd probably still be drawing clowns right now if I hadn't thought of the *101 Dalmatians* clown—after my dog—to end it. That was the perfect little bow to tie around the whole thing.

Were you working out during this period, too?

I didn't start working out, really, until the clowns were done and I realized that I'd maybe put on about 10 pounds—the COVID 10 or 15 that people refer to. Yeah, I also took part in it. So I had a scale delivered from Amazon, because I didn't have a scale previously. It wasn't like I was a great big fat person or anything, but I put on some weight, like a lot of people, because I was sitting and drawing clowns all day and I wasn't really playing my drums too much.

So you really took a break from Mastodon..

I was like, "It's been 20 years since I didn't think about Mastodon, so I'm going to take this opportunity to actively not think about Mastodon and use a different part of my brain for a little while." Which was really good, and I think that Mastodon, for me, maybe benefited from it and I benefited from it from a personal

standpoint. It just made me feel better about the whole situation, because it was hard for everybody, and I didn't even lose anybody [to the pandemic]. And it's not like it's over. It's very scary to contemplate that the fall and winter could bring an even more horrifying situation.

The political climate and presidential election aren't exactly calming everyone down, either.

It kind of sucks to be an American right now, you know? I've never been a nationalist in any way. I think if you're a person that travels a lot and goes overseas a lot, those lines tend to get more blurry and they sort of vanish a little bit. Yeah, my parents had sex here in America, but I didn't really have much to do with it. I love the country—I'm comfortable here because I was born here and I'm used to it—but what we're experiencing now is something kind of foreign. You always knew it was there, but it was kind of under the crust enough to where it was okay.

But now, since things are really bubbling over and people are showing who they really are—the worst of the worst—they're coming out and we're seeing them in broad daylight. It makes everything a lot scarier, because you're kind of in this bubble of people that are sort of like-minded, so you don't see those actions and those people very often, but now they're right out in the open. So it's like, "Really? That's a thing? That's happening?" All that stuff combined has really made things uncomfortable here. So for me, the clowns helped. They really did.

A couple of those clowns were pretty political.

I had some controversial ones that went out. There was my Trump Tower clown airplane that looked like the 9/11 scene. That was me throwing my political hat in the ring.

You hadn't drawn anything for a very long time before this, right?

I hadn't really drawn anything in about 25 years. I would do little sketches and stuff if I wanted an artist to do something for a shirt design, but I hadn't done the ritual of drawing in a long time, where you start and then you see something through to a completed piece. When I was a kid, I would sit and draw all the time. I even drew all these Disney characters when I was seven years old and sent them to Disney. I don't even know what address I sent them to, but I got this whole packet back from this Walt Disney School of Art, basically saying, "Hey, when you grow up, we'll let you pay us to come show you how to draw cartoons." [Laughs] So I got some pamphlets.

Why do you think you stopped for so long?

I don't really know why. I feel like I'm a creative monogamist, almost. My emotional creativity can only exist in one vessel at a time or something. I don't know—it's weird. I think I can maybe split it a little bit more now, but now I'm back into thinking about Mastodon and about the new stuff and how I desperately want to pore over that to make sure it's as good as it can be. I want to look around every corner and turn over every stone when it comes to the new material, because I desperately want it to be great and I don't want to be lazy or complacent about it or let something slip through my fingers. When it comes to the lyrical content and everything that surrounds it, it's a lot of work—and after 20 years, it's easy to be lackadaisical about it.

But when I was a kid, my parents and my whole family really thought that I would probably be some sort of visual artist when I grew up. When I was a young teenager, I would draw Eddie from Iron Maiden. That was like a thing. I've talked to other people who are the same age and they're like, "Yeah, there was a kid in school that could draw Eddie." But at my school there was two of us—me and my best friend, Dave. We could both draw Eddie.

When you got your schoolbooks, they'd make you put these paper bag covers on them. You'd have to make this almost, like, origami-type of cover thing for your books so they wouldn't get wrecked. And then people wanted their book covers decorated, so I would charge four bucks to draw Eddie, because that was how much one hit of white blotter acid cost. I'd have a sketchbook going all the time—I would draw King Diamond or... I think I drew Jim Jones standing with a jug of Kool-Aid, with X's for eyes. I drew Jim Morrison for a friend. I wasn't great, but I was pretty good at getting a good likeness and shading and everything. And then I moved out of my mom's when I

was 17 or so and just stopped. I just got way more into playing the drums and being in a band.

You mentioned earlier that you don't have social media. I know you used to be on Instagram, though. Why did you decide to quit?

I was just looking at it too much. I felt like it was interfering with my life. I liked being creative on there and putting out these little nuggets of terrible Photoshop things that I would make. That was really fun for a little while, but I hate the endless need for approval that I felt like I was playing into. I just don't want to feel like that. I mean, I already feel like that with Mastodon. You put out something and you're just, "Do they like it?" Fuck that. I don't want to feel that way. I don't want to feel that way at all. I know that I can't completely get rid of that, but I can take steps to try to.

I just have too much of that in my life so I felt like I needed to stop because I don't want to be creating something because I want someone to tell me how great I am. You know what I mean? I'm working on myself to get away from wanting that, that desire, but I know that that has to be some part of why you get onstage. It's awesome being onstage, but I want it to be more about the human connection—as opposed to me wanting you to tell me how great I am or what a great job I did. I really want it to be more about this exchange of energy between human beings. I'd like to make a connection with somebody and pour my heart out and have that be received and help someone, somehow. So that's why I got off Instagram.

Over the last decade or so, you've started singing more with Mastodon. I've always considered you the conceptual mastermind behind the band, and ...

Oh god, don't say that...

Well, I know from talking to you over the years that you generate a lot of the concepts and ideas, so that's my personal take. But I'm wondering if singing more has changed your outlook on Mastodon at all. Do you feel like it opens up more possibilities?

I don't know that I ever thought about it in that way. I'm just chipping in where I'm asked to chip in. And I'm always going to put forth any and all ideas that I have that I think are valid and could help complete an artistic idea that the four of us have. I feel like we're a band in the true sense of the word, where it does take all four of us to get something finished. There's not one person that's doing everything. We need all of our hands on deck, basically, when it comes down to writing and recording and getting something finished. Not one of us wants to do all the work.

But we have to think of it in terms of the big picture because on some albums, other people take up the slack. With one record, maybe this person is shining a little bit more. And then on the next one, it'll be someone else. That's going to happen over time—if you're lucky enough to have a long enough career to be able to do that.

When it comes to me singing, I'm just trying to help out. It's more of a blue-collar approach and not because of the fact that I have this clear, clean singing voice so it's going to make our music more accessible. That's never been the thought pattern behind it. If anything, I've tried to back out of that door because of the fact that I am a people pleaser and I feel like the fact that my voice is clean and clear is a problem for a lot of people that originally came onboard for Mastodon feeling like they like Brent and Troy's voices more. Troy's got this cool, heavy-metal-Peter-Gabriel tone and then Brent's got this kind of Ozzy, Sabbath-y vibe. I kind of maybe have a Josh Homme-ish sounding thing going on. People might be like, "I don't like that and I never did like that and I didn't sign up for that." But when I sing something, or commit to something, it's because the guys wanted me to. They like the sound of my voice on the music. When that happens, I go see if I can actually play it and sing it at the same time—sometimes I can and sometimes I can't. But we just try to divvy up the workload as much as we can, so that everyone's got a part to play.

When did you first realize you could sing?

I've always been a singer, since I was a kid. I was in the select choir and all that garbage—and really, truly, one of my first musical experiences that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck was singing with a choir. What made me understand the true power of being a part of something and making something happen that evoked emotion within myself was singing Handel's "Messiah" with a choir. I remember singing that and just feeling like, "Wow, this is so powerful and I'm doing it with all these people." I remember having that experience and thinking, "This is what I want to do." Not necessarily sing in a choir, but I want to be able to create something that's emotionally evocative. And I've been able to achieve that with Mastodon many, many times.

Recommended Mastodon:

Mastodon - *Blood Mountain*

Mastodon - *Crack The Skye*

Mastodon - *Leviathan*

Mastodon - *Once More 'Round The Sun*

Mastodon - *Emperor Of Sand*

Name

Brann Dailor

Vocation

Musician

□

Jimmy Hubbard