On longevity and community

Musician Ezra Koenig (of Vampire Weekend) discusses how the experience of being in a band—and what it means to make records—changes over time.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 4520 words.

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Vampire Weekend's been around since 2006. How do you keep a creative project interesting for that long? Why do you think it's lasted so long?

Well, the most obvious answer is that there was a really long break between the third and fourth album and it's hard to imagine where things would've ended up if the pace had been the same. The first two records were two years apart, and then the second and third were three years, and then it was six years. In a way, the goal is to not let that pattern continue and the next one would be 12 years, or whatever. But I do think that, looking back, it makes sense to me that it took a little longer between each record because all the touring and all the stress of being a professional musician requires a little more time off, a little more time to chill, and a little more time to find inspiration or get back to that initial amateur feeling of excitement about being creative, which I think a lot of musicians, me included, feel is actively squeezed out of you almost every day. It's like getting older—your recovery time between workouts is longer.

***Father of the Bride* is your longest album. It feels like a statement: "We're back. Here's all this stuff we had brewing." Does getting all of this out free you to perhaps think more minimally next time around?**

I think so. On the one hand, being gone for six years, I felt like the fans deserved more material, but also, just creatively, after three albums in the classic 10- to 12-song range, it was exciting to try a new format. I did a lot of press at the beginning trying to be diplomatic, "Well, it's a double album, if you want to call it that. It's also just been streaming at whatever." For people over 30, I think there's something about, "What does a double album mean?" Everybody has their own answer, but it does mean something? It's a different form and it's not something you want to do too often, but at key moments in the career of artists I admire, they did their double albums and I could just feel that this was our time to open things up to have room for different tones that couldn't fit on a short album. That doesn't seem to me like something you'd want to do back to back.

But I also had this other feeling with this record, which relates to longevity—I had so much time to think about what it would mean to come back and what it would mean to me as a person to actively continue a career as a musician. Also, I had never enjoyed touring before, and I always thought of it as kind of a necessary evil. It's gratifying when people would be excited at the shows, but we would still play the same set every night, and it was like we'd make the album and now here we'd perform it accurately, play for 70 minutes, and bounce. But I did have this feeling about coming back mid-career, 30-something: I wanted to fatten up the songbook.

That said, I have to be clear here. Maybe I'm just neurotic, but I don't want people to be like, "Oh, so you just padded it?" No, no. I swear I judiciously edited this album maybe more than any. Maybe it was because I was older, so I wasn't just being like, "What's the next album?" I was like, "What does the fabric of my life look like if I get back into this, go back on the road, and all that stuff?" It was important to me to really think about what the live band would look like and feel like, what the shows would feel like, and how the album would work with

it.

Even on this record, making all these short little songs, for the first time, I really think we're planting a seed that's going to blossom in the live show because we can extend these songs and if we do two nights somewhere, we could play this one night and that the other night. I saw the way in which the discography needed a double album, but the whole organization did, too. And, now that it's been out for six months and we've been touring, I can say that I feel like that instinct was right.

A discography, ideally, is a continuous path. It's a kind of road. I like that you were planning how to keep things moving, and to keep things interesting for the fans and for you as a band. The discography needed this now, and it will need something else further down the line.

I've been thinking about that a lot. I was trying to answer that question recently. I don't know if I've pinpointed the language to talk about it super well, but I've been thinking about it a lot, that it has to do with your sense of time, that for me and for the band, "Harmony Hall" is a newer song than "A-Punk," but we play both of them every night, so in a sense, they're equal. In the show, the performance of the songs are equally young or equally old. And so I understand, from a certain type of a music fan perspective, it's like you could think of it as the old stuff and the new stuff, almost like you're watching the stock market or something. It's along an axis of time. Whereas, for me, it's more like I look at discography more like arranging the family pictures on the wall in the house. It's like the picture of Grandma stays up there and it's right next to the picture of the baby, but of course, they're in dialogue and they're equal on the wall, it's a family.

In some sense, I think each album, and even each song, serves a different purpose. But it's tough because, on the one hand, I think all artists are encouraged by some faction of fans and critics and market forces to at least partially repeat themselves, and it's tempting and you want to, but at the same time, when I think about it in terms of a concert, you feel like, if you have an old song that accomplishes a certain emotion or a moment in the show, you got it. You got it forever.

For instance, "A-Punk" is very different than a lot of our other songs. It goes off loud because it's like everybody knows it and it's fun and it's uptempo and stuff, and the way I feel is that we don't need three other versions of it. When I think of each album and each song, they provide a different feeling or a different moment in the show and, hopefully, that almost feels like longevity in real time. When you can play four songs back to back from four different albums and they flow, but they each have a different feeling or something, now I understand why people like the live music. I didn't understand it that much when I was a younger dude, but that's when you feel like you're building something because all the songs are mixed up.

The live show is a real-time compilation, and I guess the audience is, too. Do you find that the audience is staying about the same? Are people aging with the band as younger fans are also surfacing? A wider swath of people, a larger demographic, connotes longevity.

That's exactly how I feel. We've had people, this year, come to the shows and be struck by the age range. Sometimes there's that 60-something couple there by themselves. At certain shows, you get the whole family, the 30-something parents with a kid. I've gotten a lot of nice notes, when this album came out, people basically saying, "When your first album came out, I was in college or high school and then second and third and then, now, I have kids and I play them Vampire Weekend and stuff." That's very rewarding, too, when you do feel like the whole family can come. We certainly have shows where the age range was probably eight to 70. And then, of course, the high school and college kids are there.

One thing that I've realized, and this is probably true for all artists, but it's especially true for—I don't even know what word to use anymore, indie, alternative—that at a certain point, when you're no longer in your early twenties and there's not this built-in group of people who are there to come to the show, the crowd is like a coalition. The music that we make isn't as fashionable as it was when we first came out.

I always think about that. Of course, people have talked about this in more eloquent ways, that there used to be this thing called alternative culture that was very legible and there was something called mainstream culture

that was legible and, obviously, that binary has been smashed and people are still trying to figure out, "What does it mean?" But that was the old world view, that '90s world view.

Now, when I think about who's the Vampire Weekend fan, it's harder to pinpoint. There are stereotypes, of course. Even when our new album came out, I saw some funny memes of people being like, "Oh, it's like these dudes on the crew team," and I'd just be like, "Really? Those guys on the crew team listen to rap." I don't see those guys at our show. I think, when there's not this one group to draw from, when you're not a young artist, and this is not the music that every middle schooler is familiar with because you're not so mainstream that you're on the radio, there's something cool. You're cobbling together a weird coalition of people who get into your music in different ways.

It's like you have your core fanbase who follows the journey from album one through album four. It's been cool, on this album, that you get these random people who are just like, "I never really gave you guys a chance, but I heard this one song and I tapped in after that." And so you're like, "So you came in via *Father of the Bride*. Somebody else came in via the album before…" and then you look out at the crowd, the crowd looks like that. It looks like these people tapped in at different moments and I think it's the only way. There's no well to draw from. There's not the well of youth to draw from, there's not the well of indie to draw from, which I like. It's weird and challenging to get people into it in different ways.

It mirrors the way people currently listen to music. They're looking at CNN while listening to something while a YouTube video plays on the side. It creates different entry points. I agree with you, too, that there's less of this "one single scene." Back in the day, when people were like, "We like Animal Collective and Grizzly Bear." People would listen very specifically. Now, people are more apt to say, "I like this Ariana Grande song and I like this Vampire Weekend song and I like this Deafheaven track."

It's funny. If you think about the individual Spotify year-end wrap-ups, it's all day-to-day, on Instagram and stuff. People have been sending me their end-of-year lists and I love it. It's so random. We always felt random. We never felt like we were part of a scene, so when you see people who are like, "Oh, you're my top artist this year," some people, you look through the rest of their top five and it's, I don't know, Mac DeMarco, things that would fit the bill of an older definition of indie rock, and then other people, it's like there's Phish, which I love to see. Then there's other people, it was pop, Ariana Grande and stuff, and you just realize, yeah, that's the only way.

Also, I do think, beyond a certain level, you can't get more than a thousand people in a room in any major American city and expect them to all be members of the same hyper-narrow definition of a music fan, let alone getting to 10,000. Then you've got to be like: "This is going to be all over the place." You're going to see people you never would've guessed would fuck with your music, and that's the only way. People likely wouldn't be surprised that an indie rock band from 2006 doesn't have a fan base as clearly defined as a goth band from the '80s, where tribes were really set. But then even that's not true, because I'm sure, actually, if you roll up to some giant Cure show somewhere, you'd probably also be surprised. You would see the people who look exactly like the band, but then you'd probably also be like, "Oh, for real, you're into this kind of stuff?"

There are also just more festivals, with larger audiences, which isn't always great. I remember footage of a well-known indie band playing an earlier slot at an outdoor festival—there were less than 10 people watching. That could be demoralizing. That said, I went to Governor's Island to see Björk play, and even then I was surprised by how many people weren't watching—they were using her as background music to their hangout. Maybe it's just another way to experience music. But maybe there isn't as much engagement if you're in a huge open field. Being inside a smaller space, maybe you have less room to drift…

I guess that's why it's so important that whatever your status is in the larger world of the critics, or extremely online music fans, that you have this core group of people who ride with you because sometimes at a festival it's where reality can set in. Maybe the booker liked the way your name looked on the poster. Maybe your name projected a type of generational diversity or genre diversity or something. And then, when you get there, two plus two equals three, and it reminds you: The only way to survive is if you have fans who don't just think you're cool. You need fans who are instead like, "That's one of my favorites bands and if they're at a festival,

I’m going to go watch. I don’t just like a couple songs. I’m connected to them.”

That’s also why I feel like I’ve been so much more interested in live music, getting older and looking for models of artists who are 10 to 15 years older than me and being like, “Who would I, if everything went right, want to be like when I’m in my early fifties?”

The people that I find myself gravitating toward tend to have a very special live relationship with their fans. That’s truly a two-way street. It’s this deeper, more rewarding thing than other type of success in music. I don’t even mean the money because, like you said, tours aren’t always profitable. Especially in the streaming era, where you don’t know if you can trust half these metrics about one song streamed more than that other song.

There’s something about your own shows that feels like—it’s lame to say—but pure. It’s like, “That’s how many people in that city wanted to come spend time with you,” and then you do your best to show them some love for that.

It’s like what we were talking about before the interview: that you would want to buy your Christmas toys for your kids in a real place. It’s not just about saying fuck you to Bezos, it’s about being in a space with people. We spend so much time online.

When the new single’s out, it’s usually not your friend coming over with a hard copy of it. It’s like, you were half asleep in bed and you woke up and were looking at your phone and you listened to it that way, and you spent a lot of time with it online. You might talk about it with your friends in person, but you might also talk about it in a group chat or something. The one time when you’re with human beings sometimes is the live show. That increasingly feels important. It’s important to spend time in a room together.

People have compared the new record to Phish, which ties in with this idea of the live show, and the community around it. Phish can sell out 13 nights in a row at Madison Square Garden and people will buy the 13-disc CD box set they have at those shows.

When we were in Philly for our Pennsylvania special acoustic show, a bunch of us went and saw Phish. They played at this place, the Met, in Philly and it was the smallest Phish show in 20 years, just 3,500 people. Huge by most standards, but for Phish, that was their smallest show in 20 years. The energy outside and inside the venue was just full-on pandemonium. It was a pretty incredible experience.

We had one more ticket than we needed and I was like, “I got to give it to somebody,” and then a guy who worked with Phish was like, “Go across the street because there’s an organized group of people, over 200 people, waiting in line.” We went over and a guy was like, “Who’s first in line?” And a dude had written, in Sharpie, the entire line and like 40 people in the crowd were like, “JD. JD.” There were a few weirdos closer to the venue who saw that we had a ticket and were scoping it out, but they were dishonorable. They were rogue Phish fans. Across the street, it was very organized and everybody was like, “JD, you’re up, man,” and everybody was congratulating him that he got his miracle ticket.

Outside, there was that sense of community. Then inside, like at any show, where people are really fucking psyched, there’s that sense of shared, “Oh, shit, they played that.” Then, even online, they’re watching people at the show write about the set list and give you stats and shit, like, “Oh, they haven’t done that in 10 years,” and “This is atypical that they went from this song to that song.”

That’s as good as it gets. There’s that sense of community inside, outside, and far beyond the venue. And you’re right, there’s something about Phish, that’s as independent as it gets. That’s a sense of community that I’ve rarely seen in my career as a musician. Sometimes you have these flashes of it, it’s certainly bigger than the band, but it’s all you could hope for from a live music culture.

Do you imagine Vampire Weekend, in a Phish-like sense, being a thing that, in 20 years, you could still be doing?

I can say, still buzzing off of their show in Philly, if we could light up a room like that when we're in our early fifties, then we killed it. There's also just the passion. If we can accomplish that, that would be amazing. On the one end, Phish are hyper specific. It's about the improv factor. That's not my vibe, my strong suit, and that's a very important part of what they do. But if your songs can feel exciting to people 20-plus years after they came out… Some of that's out of your hands, but people talk about how a song has aged or how an album has aged and some things age positively and some things age negatively.

Being able to go play to people who are passionate about your music in your early fifties is basically as gold as it gets. We should be so lucky. But how do you get there? A big part of it is giving people their money's worth. We've been playing significantly longer shows than we ever had in the past. A lot of times, if I get invited to a show, it's somebody being like, "Come check out this artist for free on the guest list," and I roll up and I don't have the usual fan experience. After 30 minutes, I'm like, "I get it. Cool. I'll go spend some time with the record tomorrow." Then you realize, no, some people only get to see one or two shows a year and they're cool with being there for hours.

If we kick into a slow song, and I see a few people going to get a beer, if there's a part of my ego that's wounded for a half a second, I quickly put myself in their shoes and think, "You know what, getting a beer is part of being at a show, it's part of the experience." You go get a beer when it's a song that you don't need to be fully present for. Also, they're coming back. If you were 40 minutes in and you play one slow song and everybody bounces, okay, that's worth examining. But if they're just going to get a beer and go to the bathroom and then come back, it's like being at a party. You're not going to get offended if someone steps outside for a cigarette at a party, like "Hey, man, the action's in here. I'm trying to create a salon atmosphere and you went outside for a cigarette. We were having an interesting conversation." That's so lame and narcissistic.

When you came back to make *Father of the Bride*, were you pulled back just to make another record or were you pulled back because you missed the live experience? A bit of both?

It was more excitement to get in the studio. In some ways, I was dreading getting back on the road, so I almost had to start researching. It's a naïve thing, but I was always into studio records. I was interested in production and songwriting and album covers and how people dressed in the pictures. That one side of music. I would go to shows of bands I like and feel like I was missing something, and so, in some ways, very late in life, I had to say, "What's the difference between great bands who go on tour and do adequate shows and great bands who make great tours?" It's an incredibly naïve question, but as somebody who's more of a record collector nerd, I didn't really know the answer.

And then you start going deeper and looking at different people's set lists and watching more footage and going out to shows more. Also, luckily, I work with people who work exclusively in live music. You've got your booking agent. You've got your tour managers. For instance, we work this guy Brian, who used to be our tour manager, and now he's one of our main touring dudes, and he was a big advocate that we should go put up a show at Madison Square Garden for our comeback tour. I was a little on the fence because I'm just a bit conservative with stuff like that and I was like, "All right, I just want to make sure our first big show back in New York after six years is sold out." And he was like, "I think you can do that."

Then, he was like, "In fact, I think you should do a 360," which is 7,000 more tickets you need to sell. I'm sure I've seen shows both ways—180 degree and 360 degree—but it's something I literally never thought about. You could ask me about two different types of reverb or something and I would be like, "Well, that connotes that and that connotes that." But for that, I was like, "I don't know. What does it mean…obviously, it's more tickets." He said, "Watch this live clip of Pearl Jam. They did a 360 and what does a Pearl Jam show feel like as opposed to some other band?"

It made such a huge difference that we went for it and it worked. The energy in that room was amazing. Trust me, even the hometown New York show is not always the kindest vibe, but there's something about 360. We're looking at the audience. The audience is looking at each other. In a very obvious way, it's a spatial representation of community versus the 180 where everybody's looking one way. Then also, on top of that, he and a lot of other people that we worked with went to shows at the Garden six months before we were going just to do a walkthrough

and to really think about shit. Again, it’s so obvious, but when you’re on tour and you’re burned out, you might sit backstage the whole day taking a nap.

Then you realize, these dudes go have the experience of not being on the VIP guest list. They think: “What does it feel like if I get off the subway at 34th Street and I walk up that way. What’s happening? What am I seeing?” It’s unbelievable how easy it is to go play hundreds of shows and not learn anything about that, not learn about the fan experience. As an artist, you never get to see yourself live. It’s funny. I wonder what it’s like to be at our show. But then you realize, there are some questions you can answer. Like, what is it like to sit in the venue and see somebody else? It’s an ongoing education and being into studio stuff doesn’t answer any of those questions.

We played Barclays once on the last album and there was something about that show. I didn’t feel like we filled up the room. That’s partially why I was hesitant to play the Garden, because arenas—that’s not us. I still kind of feel that way, but that Garden show worked. It was getting to learn from certain mistakes. And to learn: It’s not just the records pushing bands and fans into bigger rooms. It’s the community. It’s the live show itself. It’s much more complicated.

Ezra Koenig Recommends:

5 Movies That Are Long and/or Slow

I liked seeing all these movies in a theater at some point in my life. I think they’re all pretty good but this is in no way a list of my favorite movies of all time. I just have a positive association with my viewing experience for each of these. Some are long, some are slow, some are long and slow. I think seeing long/slow movies can be good for creativity - even if there are moments of boredom.

1. *Tokyo Olympiad* (1965)
2. *The Limits of Control* (2009)
3. *The Loneliest Planet* (2011)
4. *Stalker* (1979)
5. *Where Spring Comes Late* (1970)

Name
Ezra Koenig

Vocation
Musician, Songwriter, Producer

Michael Schmelling