On your refining your approach

Musician Greg Mendez discusses making what interests you, learning through trial and error, and not putting all your eggs in one basket.

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How do you define for yourself what success or failure looks like with a song or an album?

It's pretty subjective, I think. I write a lot of songs and even record some of them where I'm just like, "This isn't it." I don't think I could explain the difference, but there is something there where it's like, "I don't want to listen to that one again." Or even if I'm listening back to it and if I want to skip it, I'm like, "Okay, something's not right." It's me listening to myself being like, "Do I want to continue listening to this song?" That's the big thing.

How did you get started with songwriting, and what drew you to it initially?

I just always liked music. I don't know. It always did something for me that nothing else did. I always wanted to do that. Even as soon as I started playing guitar, I was more interested in making something new than learning a song. Or I did learn songs, but I didn't get that much satisfaction from just playing a song. It was more, "I want to know why I like that. What's going on there?"

Do you throw away as many songs as you used to? Is it just as difficult as it used to be to write songs or do you feel like you've developed more of a knack?

When I first started, and maybe even for many years, I would work on one song at a time and would be very concerned with finishing it and making it good if I didn't think it was there. Looking back, that was a little bit like beating a dead horse.

Now I have these periods where I just get a bunch of ideas down. It'll be a chord progression and a melody and that's it—30 seconds of this, and then 30 seconds of that. I'll have all these little things going. One of the things that I've realized is that it's kind of pointless to work on something that I'm not feeling in the moment. So, if I have 50 little things, then I can just be, "Oh, I'm feeling like this. This is the one I'm drawn to right now. Go to that." Maybe I won't finish it, but I guess it's like not putting all your eggs in one basket. Originally, I would be really trying to hammer down on this one thing. It's not worth it a lot of the time, and now I have a bigger basket. Sometimes [songs will] germinate or whatever for years. I always have that pool. I try not to be too attached to, like, "Oh, I really want to get this idea finished in this timeframe." It always comes out better if it's just the moment for it.

Some of the songs on the new record are, what, almost 10 years old?

Some of them are like 15.

Was that a case of them not being quite done yet or you not having a home for them yet, or both?

It was kind of both, I think. I actually didn't do that much to them melodically and structurally. They're pretty much exactly the same. All I did was change some lines, like lyrically. I did the arrangements a little differently than they were years ago. But yeah, I don't know. It was just one of those things where I just kept… I was listening to some of those old ones, and I just kept thinking about those ones.

Do you think the songs would've come out differently if you weren't in the mindset of working on an album?

Possibly. I don't know if I do that consciously, but I think I do it. But at the same time, no. I think those songs are what they should be. "Hoping You're Doing Okay" was pretty crazy-sounding in the 2009 demo, or whatever. There were kazoos that were acting like horns and a bunch of drum tracks. There were a lot of things happening. I started trying to do that again with… somewhat because of the urging of a friend of mine who really liked that one, and it just wasn't working. Maybe it was the fact that it was being recorded better or… I think they would be like that even if I was working on them to just be singles or whatever.

Has your taste in production developed and changed much?

I think so. When I was younger I was a lot more concerned with being inventive or having something be interesting or weird-sounding. I think that is cool, but I don't think it's necessary as much. I don't want it to be the focus.

I don't want it to be the intention. If that happens, it's going to just happen. I'm not going into it with that in mind. I'm kind of just like, "I want these songs to be the best versions of these songs."

The songs on your last few records, they're often short and to the point, but with a strong idea at the core. They're sparse, but the arrangements are really solid. I'm curious if that's more of a natural refinement over time or a conscious choice to not do what you used to do.

I think maybe it was a little bit of both. I went in with a few rules in terms of the arrangements and…well, actually, only one rule. The one rule was that if I added something and I didn't know whether it was making it better or not, I would take it out. That's something I didn't really do before. I ended up with a lot of vocal harmonies that were fine but that didn't necessarily need to be there. On this one there's very few vocal harmonies. There's some, but I only wanted these elements to come in if it was really like, "Oh, yes. That is part of it." Rather than just like, "Well, it might be cool to…" Which is kind of what I used to do.

What I found in my stuff is that I would sometimes use that as a bandaid for songwriting that wasn't quite there. I don't think everybody does that. There's a lot of stuff that has a lot of layers and stuff going on because that's what should be happening. But for the stuff that I was doing, sometimes I was like, "Oh, there should be a vocal harmony here," because I was bored with what was going on.

You've said in interviews that you hope that your music can do for listeners what music that you loved did for you. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that. What did that music do for you? What do you hope it specifically does?

At its core, it made me feel less alone. I feel like music always helped me understand things, not even in a literal sense.

People have responded to this record in particular lyrically a lot, but I don't actually consider myself a lyrics person. A lot of times, if I'm listening to music, the lyrics aren't really what I'm latching onto. What I will need a song for sometimes has nothing to do with the lyrics at all. It's just the way that the sounds, and chords, and the melodies, and the way that it's being sung and played gives me a certain feeling, and I feel like I need that feeling.

Do you feel like learning to write better lyrics is more of a means to an end, to support the music?

I don’t think it’s secondary. I think it’s just as important. What I meant, in terms of it being secondary, is that I could listen to a song for years and not know what the lyrics are. If I don’t understand them, maybe I just won’t look it up. I’ll remember all the syllables, but a lot of times it’ll be…It might be an ADHD thing or some kind of processing thing, but there are songs that I love and have known for years that I just don’t know what the lyrics are, and I’m okay with that.

I feel like you’ve also refined your process over the years by just not taking it so seriously all the time. Like you said before about not putting all your eggs in one basket, you’re able to work on a bunch of different things at once. If something’s not working, you just move on to something else.

Or just nothing.

Or just stop. You’re more okay with stopping now?

Yeah. I feel like that’s really important. I mean, with writing and recording, too. This is another advantage of just doing it at home. I really don’t think there’s that much to be gained by if I’m not feeling something. If I’m like, “Oh, I’m going to record some stuff for today,” and I try for an hour or two and it’s just like nothing’s really clicking, I’ll just walk away.

What do you do when you walk away?

Anything else. Hang out with a friend, watch TV. Just anything else. Because, I mean, in the past I’ve definitely tried to like, “I’m going to do this for 8 hours or 10 hours,” or whatever. I feel like I usually just end up with the same results after eight hours as I did after two hours, which is nothing. The result’s nothing except I’m way more tired and way more frustrated and upset.

What do you do if you’re not consciously trying to come up with stuff and an idea pops in your head? Do you stop what you’re doing and find a quiet place to write that idea down or make a voice memo?

If it’s good enough, yeah. I’ll do a lot of voice memos walking down the street, very quietly because I don’t want anyone else to hear it. But then it’s funny, those almost never turn into something because I lose the context. I’ll have the chords and stuff in my head, too, but if I don’t get those down, then I’ll never find them again, pretty much.

Your live shows are very sparse, too. What do you think about the relationship between the recording of the song and performing? I’m curious if that is something that you’re thinking about in terms of what the function of a record is versus the function of a performance.

I do think that they’re different spaces. Well, if I’m being honest, the most fundamental thing is that it’s so much fucking easier to just show up to a show with a guitar and a keyboard and two people in a car rather than full drum set, and amps, and all this stuff. That’s a part of it.

Live, everything is taking up physical space in a different way. Whereas I feel like it’s easier for me to sing and play acoustic guitar pretty quietly, but then also have drums and electric guitars and have them sit in a way where I don’t have to start singing louder and playing louder. It’s like the drums are taking up this much space and volume, and there’s not much you can do about that. I feel with the live stuff, I want it to feel… I think the records feel small and intimate, and I want the live stuff to also feel like that. I feel like the easiest way is to do it even smaller.

You’re about to get wrist surgery. That is essentially going to knock you out of commission for a while. How are you bracing yourself for that?

I’m not really bracing myself for it. I’m kind of just like, “Going to take the plunge,” I guess. I really don’t know. I’m hoping that it’ll just give me a nice little break. That’ll be good. There’s part of me worries that

I'm going to lose something or move backwards somehow. I'm not going to be playing guitar or writing guitar music for a couple months, and part of me worries that that's going to stagnate or regress or something. But, I don't know. Maybe I'll just write little one-handed keyboard things.

I imagine it's hard to see it as an opportunity. Probably feels more like a setback.

Yeah, it definitely doesn't feel like an opportunity. But maybe it will be. Maybe a little break will be good and I'll feel refreshed. But, I don't know.

I have been thinking, I have all these song fragments and ideas. I'm like, "I wish I could just work on those." Maybe I can without playing guitar. But I've been in this weird thing where I haven't been able to really follow through with anything for months and months, so maybe that will be a good restriction for that, where maybe I actually will write lyrics for some of these.

Do you know the piano player Keith Jarrett?

No.

He's this virtuosic jazz piano player from the fusion era. He had a stroke, or some kind of a health issue that left him with one of his arms paralyzed, so he can only play piano with one hand now. But he still plays so beautifully because he's Keith Jarrett. There's amazing videos of him playing. He spoke about how it made him think differently and play differently. He can't do what he used to do, but he still does Keith Jarrett things.

When I play keyboard, I have no real training or anything, I just figure things out note by note. A lot of times, I'll play three or four note chords and there'll be things that I could play with one hand, but I'll generally just play the top note or two with my right hand instead. So I'm doing these little chords but with two hands, and I would like to try and get better at just doing that stuff with one hand so then that'll open up the second hand. So, I do have a goal [*laughs*].

Greg Mendez recommends:

humdog – pandora's vox: on community in cyberspace

Brigitte Engerer– *Chopin: Complete Nocturnes*

of Montreal – *The Bird Who Continues To Eat The Rabbit's Flower*

Dark Days (documentary)

"Mine First" by Shalom

Name
Greg Mendez

Vocation
musician