

On being self-taught and continuing to explore



Musician Ihsahn on the value of creating for yourself, accessing flow states, and imposter syndrome.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2843 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#).

How would you describe your artistic philosophy?

It depends what I'm working on, but in general I come from this black metal background that's very solitary and confined. But to really answer this, I could refer you to [Rick Rubin's](#) new book about creativity. I've read it twice now, and it resonated deeply with me. When you're creating, of course you're putting yourself, your heart, on the line. At the same time, you're just tapping into something. Most of the stuff that I create that I'm most satisfied with, I've no idea where the idea came from. So, you tap into something, you feel there's something there, and you just do your absolute best to make it the best it can be.

When I've been teaching some of my guitar students, I've had some people feel they should be doing things a certain way, or [they feel] a lot of external motivations and pressures for doing what they do. But as I've told them, there's so many things that you *have* to do in life, and playing rock guitar is not one of them. It's one of the things that you do because you love it and it's meaningful and it's pleasurable to you. By doing it a lot, you might then become so good at it that someone else may take pleasure in your playing as well. But that's an added bonus.

You do it for yourself, first and foremost.

Yes, and the same goes for creativity. Create something that is valuable and meaningful for you. If you follow it without ego, you're channeling it through your own lens of who you are. Everything beyond that is out of your control. I can tell you this from over 30 years' experience of putting stuff out there. I've seen how albums I did when I was very young got absolutely slaughtered by the media, especially the major media, and then later the same magazines put the same albums up as like, "the most important of the last 30 years," and stuff like that. It had never anything to do with what I've made. It's just whatever people wanted it to be. You follow your own impulse to create and then, when it's finished and you want to present it to the rest of the world, you have no control over how people will react to it. And it shouldn't matter. You should do the same thing regardless. If you make it for a particular outcome, then you're doing it an injustice in a sense.

A wise man once told me, "If you expect anything from music, you expect too much." You can't do it for accolades or fame or financial rewards.

Yes, exactly. I'm a bizarre example of that myself. I started out playing some of the most inaccessible music there is. In the early '90s, playing extreme black metal with corpsepaint and everything—that kind of pushed people away. So, it's against all odds that it became my career. I know so many talented musicians who are operating just in Norway, within the parameters of the normal, and they may be an amazing R&B style artist, but they don't stand a chance against even the middle-of-the-road R&B artist in the US because there's a different

culture. So, I'm confident that your best chance is actually making something that is not necessarily comparable to someone else, but just so inherently a product of your own distorted lens that it becomes a unique thing on its own, not something in relation to something else.

You've said that you don't know where your best ideas come from, that you're channeling them in a way. Can you talk more about that?

I think most people who do this extensively, you could make a plan to create something good but most of the time you just have to show up. Then sometimes it comes through and sometimes it doesn't. I know it sounds very metaphysical in that sense, but I think everybody who does creative work of any kind will notice that suddenly there's something there that wasn't there before, and you are often in a flow state when this happens. So, the only thing you can do really is show up.

I've done a lot of the other thing as well—just waiting for inspiration to strike, not going into the studio and not sitting down with my guitar because I didn't feel inspired. But then what I feel are my most gratifying guitar riffs, for example, are usually from an iPhone recording of me just noodling on the guitar without any purpose and then suddenly something appears. To put it more in perspective, it's also that other thing: 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. The initial idea, the guitar riff or a line for a chorus, it's like seeing the edge of some gem in the mountain. Then you really have to carve it out. That's the hard work. It's not compositions that fall into your head finished. But it's hard to know when and where that spark will appear.

Many years ago, you told me that you felt music chose you instead of the other way around. Have you always felt that way?

Yes. But of course, it's something that I'm not very outspoken about because it sounds very pretentious. Oh, music chose you? *[Laughs]* And of course I'm super privileged to grow up in a country that is free and with opportunities that [allowed me to] actually have that dream. So, I have a rational perspective on it. But on an existential level, I never really felt I had a choice in that. And I never really related to music like a hobby, but not as work either. It's a way of life.

Even in the early days before and during the time when we formed Emperor, it was not like we did other stuff and then also went to the rehearsal space and made music. We lived in that rehearsal space making this music, and then we went to someone's home and listened to that style of music. And then at night we would go out with torches and live that atmosphere. It was black metal 24/7. It is a lifestyle and not something you do on the side. I don't do the torches anymore, but I'm very, very consumed with music, and I find it very hard not to be a part of it.

In these periods between albums, when there's a lot of practical stuff to be done—doing press, making music videos, doing press shots, rehearsing—all that stuff is cool, but it's like an ache that I don't have the luxury at this moment to be creative and make something new. Even at family holidays, where of course you want to relax and hang out, I sometimes feel myself wanting to get locked into music. So, it's not always a very charming trait.

You collaborated with your bandmates on the first few Emperor releases before writing the last one by yourself. You've been making solo albums ever since. What do you see as the pros and cons of collaborating versus working solo?

I've been thinking about this a lot lately, why I always end up doing stuff on my own. Even before I joined Emperor, I'd already been playing with [Emperor guitarist] Samoth since I was 13. We formed Emperor when I was 16, so three years prior. Even before that, I was playing in some local bands, but most of the time it was just me, my guitar, my electric organ, a microphone, and a four-track recorder. I started recording my own music when I was 11 or 12. So, my first introduction to making music was always this solitary experience where I was kind of putting this musical puzzle together before I ventured into bands. And then in some way I feel like I returned to what was the gateway for me into creating music in the first place. So, for me it was natural.

When you're in a band or in some kind of collaboration like that, of course there's someone else there who can come up with something that maybe sparks an idea with you. "Oh, what about this?" There's something really special about that. But for the most part, I'm just extremely picky in a way. Maybe I need more time to focus. And when I have an idea, it's very hard for me to break out of that and make a compromise.

I mean, you don't often see painters collaborating. You would hardly see authors collaborating in writing a novel. If you're making a movie, there might be someone who has the main idea, but necessarily you will have a lot more people involved. Beyond that—in the making of art, anyway—I think collaboration is probably most common in music. Most other art forms are usually very solitary practices.

Working by yourself also allows you to move at your own pace, rather than feeling the pressure of someone else waiting to see what you'll come up with.

Yes, but there's a lot of imposter syndrome going on, especially working on your own, because then you could bang your head against the wall until something comes out. Sometimes in collaborations if one person is kind of banging their head against the wall, the other one might have the idea to spark things on. So, there's definitely pros and cons to all kinds of methods. If you enjoy the energy of things happening in collaborations, that's the way to go. If you feel that becomes a distraction and you can't focus properly and you feel you need to isolate yourself to be able to pull on the right threads, then maybe that's the right thing to do.

You run all of your ideas by your wife, don't you?

Everything. And we've been creatively collaborating since '98, before we got married. Of course we did Peccatum together, and now that she's doing Starofash, I will try to be that kind of creative sparring partner for her. And she's the same for me because it's sometimes super hard to be objective about something when you're in that rabbit hole. To have someone that you truly trust, who you know will say their honest opinion about something and not pat you on the back or try to kind of flatter or go around it if it's not good, is invaluable.

During the pandemic, you put out a couple of EPs, *Telemark* and *Pharos*, that you described as experiments. What do you see as the value of experimentation, and what did you get out of the process of making those two records?

Well, I did the *Telemark* EP in my mother tongue. It was my first release in Norwegian, and I was told even by people who don't speak Norwegian that it gave the vocals that extra edge of authority. And so basically with the *Telemark* EP, I was doing everything that I felt confident about, just straight-up rock/metal, black metal-ish music with a horn section. It was very bread and butter kind of stuff, and really delving into themes from this country where I grew up. So, it was very close to home and close to heart. Of course, these elements have always been part of my music, but just partly. This was distilling out that core element. With the *Pharos* EP, I kind of went in the other direction—doing everything that I don't know how to do.

You're releasing two versions of your new album, a metal version and an orchestral version. This seems like a massive project. Were you excited about the challenge, and did you ever have moments when you thought, "Why did I make so much work for myself?"

It was absolutely some of both. It took me quite a long time to put the scaffolding around it, just getting the conceptual ideas and how I could approach this. I planned this to be two separate releases from the start, and then I had to write the music for that purpose. I was very excited by the idea, and there were so many things that I had to learn and that I got the privilege to really dig deep into. I may have said this before, but I always try to add another step to my toolbox for every album that I make. But if I'm honest, I think I added about 10 new steps making this album. Sometimes I felt like I was far too much in the deep end.

I'm self-taught. I don't have a formal education or anything, so all these orchestration things, that was the hardest part: Getting those orchestrations to support the metal elements within that context, but also in a way that they would function on their own. Writing something that is orchestral in essence and something that is metal is not that hard but trying to do both at the same time turned out to be quite challenging. I had a lot of doubts along the way and felt that I'd bitten off more than I could chew, but the conclusion, luckily, was that

I've never been this content with a final outcome, given what I set out to do. I'm super proud of both the versions of the album. And I'm proud that I've managed to give myself the challenges and put myself in those situations where I'm truly passionate about doing it. I haven't nodded off into comfort and made it boring for myself. I love music too much for it ever to become boring.

You mentioned that you don't have any formal music training. How do you think that's helped you and how do you think it's hurt you?

It makes things take longer, absolutely. Especially in the early days, I didn't know what I didn't know. I was 16. The muscle memory wasn't there, so it was all pure intuition. But what we lacked in experience, we really made up for in dedication with Emperor. But I think the more you get to do this, and the more you learn, the more you realize how much you don't know. I was probably more confident at 19 than I am at 48. The only thing that's growing is the imposter syndrome. But I've chosen to look at that positively instead of beating myself up like, "Oh, I don't know all the orchestrations."

Pre-internet, I was reading Korsakov's Principles of Orchestration, but it's really hard to acquire that kind of knowledge from score books when you don't really read scores that well and you don't have the theoretical vocabulary to understand it, especially in English. Later on, with YouTube and articles on the internet, it became so much more accessible to understand all the techniques and harmonic language that film composers use.

But the other side of that formal education is, for example, like the principal at the music school I worked at previously. He's a highly trained and skilled piano player, a concert pianist. He was impressed at all my songwriting experience, even though I have none of his training. I've been writing songs since I was 10, but it never even occurred to him, in his entire career, to try and write something. But then, of course, if you delve into classical music, with the awe-inspiring grandeur of Bach or Chopin, of course it wouldn't occur to you to try and make something of your own. But coming from rock and roll, there's not much to it.

There's a sense that it might be more achievable.

Yeah. So, I think not knowing jazz theory or classical music or being schooled in any way, you kind of go in with a bit of arrogance. But now that I've gotten to know these things a bit, I can pick top shelf. Sometimes I wish I could have had a proper, old school English education where you read Homer in Latin or whatever. But then again, if I want to read a book, I can pick top shelf: Dostoevsky or something. It's not like that's past me. So, I guess that's why I still have this feeling that I'm only scratching the surface. There's so much more to explore.

Ihsahn recommends:

Rick Rubin's *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*

I enjoy a lot of the teachings of the wild iceman, Wim Hof. I'm currently very passionate about breathing retentions and ice bathing.

The Sopranos. It's the 25th anniversary this year, and I've started rewatching it. I think it kickstarted the whole thing where TV became the serious stuff and movies became light entertainment.

Bach. I have a tendency to start every day by listening to some Bach.

Boy Child: The Best of Scott Walker 1967-1970

Name

Ihsahn

Vocation

musician

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Andy Ford

