

On the importance of staying in motion



Vocalist, guitarist, and songwriter J Mascis (Dinosaur Jr.) discusses observing how others work, longevity and timing, and getting better by just doing it.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2143 words.

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Dinosaur Jr. have been busy over the last few years, with a new record and live shows. Were you working on your new solo record at the same time? Do you like to multitask in that sense, or do you like to compartmentalize?

I did this during lockdown pretty much. I'm usually doing something for a particular project. I'll write songs thinking about *that* album usually. Writing for Dino, I would always think about what the other guys could play or not play. Limitations would be in my mind. When I'm writing for myself, I don't think that. I don't have the limitations if I'm writing for myself, except for the solo albums I'm trying to keep it acoustic as much as possible. But I sort of failed.

Why the push for acoustic?

Because I think that I'll go out and play it alone.

So, functionality.

Yeah. But then as I went along, I liked drums, so I put drums on everything and I was bored of the...The first few solo albums, I tried to play leads on acoustic and now I've just gotten sick of it. So I didn't even bother trying. It's a weird combo of things, and then my friend's playing piano on most of the songs. So it seems like maybe I should have a band to play live, but I don't. I guess I'll just try to play the songs solo, still, see what they sound like.

What I've tried in the past is to have the opening band learn some of the songs and that turned out good. That could work maybe, but it's also not that easy.

The last time I saw you play was in 2016 at Le Guess Who Festival in Utrecht, in the Netherlands.

I mostly remember the canals of Utrecht going outside.

It's so beautiful. I know you're a big cyclist, and that's such a cycling culture.

Yeah, I've definitely biked there. They don't mess around. You have to jump in the flow there.

When did cycling become a focus for you? I would imagine cycling around while you're on tour, creating that habit must be so great for your brain and your mental space.

I'd say maybe 10 years ago. I was just trying to figure out some way to exercise that I could stand, I guess.

For some reason I can't imagine you doing CrossFit.

Yeah, right. Or just going to the gym. I can't stand it.

Do you feel like you use your bicycle as more than exercise or is it simply functional for getting your body moving?

I think it helps just to get outside, too. I think it makes me less depressed overall.

I've always read about your devotion to your hometown of Amherst. I'm projecting, but there can be this spiritual bond that comes from your roots, where every corner you turn you have a memory there.

I guess we call it you're a townie if you just stay in a town where you're born. Maybe I just have that townie kind of mentality.

Would you recommend visiting Amherst?

I can't recommend it, but go ahead. I never recommend it because I don't want to be held responsible. [laughs]

I mean, you're like the town mascot.

I'm not, even. Charles [Thompson, aka Black Francis] from the Pixies lives on my street. So I'm not even the biggest rock guy on my street, forget the town.

Do you guys know each other well? Do you hang out?

I know him. We don't really hang out much. Everybody seems to be so busy all the time though.

Are you someone who likes to keep a packed schedule? Are you one to always be busy or do you have to make sure that you have downtime?

It's interestingly both. I can't stand doing nothing, so I like to have something to do and I like to travel. That makes me able to stay. I couldn't stay here if I didn't leave a lot, I guess. And my wife's from Berlin, so I've dragged her here, which is strange, but she wants to get back to Berlin a lot so that we can stay there, too.

Are you able to write as you travel?

Not really. It's more of a home thing, writing.

Besides being at home, what do you need? Do you need complete isolation? Do you need a snack? What's the scenario?

I just like to sit in the kitchen and watch TV shows on the computer and play the guitar. Lately, I've been watching *Shameless*, the US version. I watched the whole English one. I bought the DVDs years ago. I liked that shit. I didn't know if I wanted to watch the American one, and now I finally am. I feel like I miss the main guy in the English show, I think he has a cooler vibe than the main guy in the American show.

When you started out as a teen with Deep Wound, did you have any conception that this was going to be it? That music was going to work out?

Oh no. I was just a kid and I was into punk rock. All the records I liked you had to mail order and they only would make a thousand. The hardcore scene wasn't really about making any money or doing anything, but once I got out of it and started Dino, I'd see these bands that would tour, the SST bands, Meat Puppets, and that's just what I wanted to do. I was hoping it would work out just to not work at McDonald's, to make enough money playing, touring, or something.

As you pushed further in that direction, how did you hone your technical skill as a guitarist? Was it starting Dinosaur and playing with other talented musicians or was it just by the fact of playing all the time?

Yeah, just from playing. I didn't even care. We didn't really care to be accomplished. Initially we wanted to be good enough to get our ideas across. And I played drums so I thought I could probably teach somebody how to play drums because I had a lot of lessons and stuff. I got better on guitar just through touring, playing. Just from touring I can play faster than I ever needed to or wanted to play. Just from playing so much all of a sudden you can play better.

With drums I wanted to play faster and faster and practiced a lot. But guitar, I just never approached it as practicing. I would just write songs and stuff, and it never mattered to me that technically I was getting to play really fast.

And now you're identified with your instrument. There is something incredible about being known as an iconic guitarist. I doubt you care deeply about how the world perceives you, but isn't it wild that the thing that you use as a mode to write songs has become this symbol for you as a person?

Yeah. I just played a gig last night, the band I played drums in. And that was interesting ,too, just to go back to what I was doing as a kid, what I wanted to do. It's all strange.

Do you have a different feeling when you play the drums, beyond the sentimentality of nostalgia?

Yeah, it's different, but the goal is the same: just trying to communicate the songs as well as possible.

I wanted to ask about the J Mascis Jazzmaster that Fender put out. It must be surreal to have your name on a guitar, to have it commodified in that way. Do you often get people coming up to tell you that they're using that guitar, or even just people who aim to play the same way that you do?

It's cool. It's hard to play like someone because it's so much their personality.

When you play, the distinct personality I see is someone so zoned in. Does it feel that way to you?

Yeah, sometimes. We just played with the guy from the Roots, Captain Kirk [Douglas], the guitarist. We were playing a Neil Young song, "Down By the River," and then he's just like, "Okay, now at the end we'll go on to 'Hey Joe'," as if we know how to play any song—which we don't. I'm just like, "You just assumed that since you're a guitar player and you know how to play 'Hey Joe' that everybody knows it. But we don't. I know how to play covers on drums, but guitar, I never played it at a time where I was in a cover band or thought about learning songs or anything. So the guitarist in the opening band knew how to play "Hey Joe" and I had him show me how to play it.

It was cool. I didn't know how to play it before then, never thought about playing it, but I learned it.

I love that sentiment. You developed your guitar skill by writing your own songs, by playing your own songs, so learning other songs wasn't at your origin as a guitarist.

I remember once I was showing Kim Deal a Dino song she was singing, and I realized I didn't know how. I couldn't do barre chords when I started because I felt it was too hard on my fingers. I couldn't press all the strings down at once or anything. It was too difficult. But if you're writing your own songs, you can do stuff like that.

Yeah, absolutely. You can pick and choose. You've gotten to take that approach with the people you work with as well. For example, you've worked with so many comedians, like in your own music videos or appearing on Portlandia. How did you get into that community?

A long time ago, the first time we were on the David Letterman show, the girl who booked it went out with Tim Meadows from *Saturday Night Live*. He was a fan, and I met him and became friends with him. Then I would go to *SNL* quite a bit. I had sat in with the band once, Tim Meadows got me to do that, and it was the day that they did the "More Cowbell" sketch. I played with Fred [Armisen] on his last show he ever did. He invited me. I played on some skit the last show. Being in a skit, it's just high stress. They're all going crazy because it's live and it's just madness.

The old cliché is always that comedians want to be rock stars and rock stars want to be comedians.

Everybody likes comedy, I guess. It's always fun to be on things and just get to see how they work. I always liked *All My Children*, the soap opera, and somehow I convinced Ben Stiller to ask his mom, who was on the show at the time, to bring me on the set, and I got to go check out *All My Children* one day. That was pretty big for me.

Are you and Ben Stiller pals?

No, but he wanted me to do something for *Reality Bites*. I was like, "Oh yeah, I'll give you the song. You make your mom bring me to set." Something like that. It was awesome.

Are you open to giving your songs to other projects? Are you picky about who to license it to?

I'm not that picky yet, I guess. These days it seems like most things are okay. In the '90s I saw people being in GAP ads and I didn't want to do it. I think they wanted me to do it. And then I saw Neil Young did it and I was really confused. [jokingly] Why would Neil Young be in a GAP ad? The GAP just seemed so lame to me.

When you're working on new material, do you listen to much music?

Yeah, but not like when I was a kid. I'd listen to records all the time. Something about streaming is just not fun anymore. If you have every song in the world on your phone, it makes me not want to listen to anything because it's just too much. It always sounds so bad. I know Neil Young talks about that. Like 5% of the sound is coming out of the phone. I don't think you can really get as into music these days through streaming and there's just nothing there to latch onto. Your body doesn't feel it. It's just weird.

Lior's Five Essential Dinosaur Jr. Songs:

"Freak Scene"

"Feel the Pain"

"Start Choppin'"

"In a Jar"

"Out There"

Name

J Mascis

Vocation

musician (Dinosaur Jr.)

□

Jeffrey Fowler

