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On learning to speak your own artistic language

Musician Joe Talbot (IDLES) discusses the hard work it takes to achieve what you set out to do, learning how to articulate yourself, and the many different kinds of success.

You released your fourth album *CRAWLER* in November. Does your process change from album to album?

I always see albums as a challenge, or almost like homework that you set yourself where it's a problem that you need to solve. I'm quite a pragmatist and I like my workstation to have all the tools in the right place. My dad was an artist, a sculptor, and I learned a lot from his attitude towards art where he'd get up at 6am every day, go to the workshop, work all day, and get home late. He enjoyed that process of just grafting, but for something that he loved. And he always talked to me about artistic language and its development; this idea that you can teach people things about yourself and it's not about convincing them. Some people just assume that our music's political-capital P-where it's like party politics. And it's not, it's never been that. I wanted it to try and teach people that everyone wants to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Everyone wants to belong. The emptiness and the darkness of death is there, but it feels so much lighter when you know that everyone is with you.

Was there a catalyst in having that kind of outlook?

I came from a real place of isolation before I found music. I was really into drugs and avoiding the realities of the morning for 20 years. I wanted to create music and art that abridged that, that you can become part of the universe of something much bigger than yourself, and teach people that by being vulnerable myself. I wanted to write as naive and blunt a message as possible in order to open myself up for criticism, but also allow the audience to feel that they can be vulnerable too. So it writes off the pseudo intellectuals. They're not going to like our music, but what happens is we have a very open and vulnerable audience that enjoy it.

And what are the steps involved in creating that kind of universe?

For the first three albums before *Crawler*, my problem to solve was: how can I distill what I am and what I want to be into as blunt an instrument as possible, in order to get who I am across as quickly as possible with no room to hide behind metaphor. And that's what *Ultra Mono* was: how can we be this steroided bloated version of Idles that everyone thinks we are? It's not like we weren't that, but it was very much an effigy of what Idles was. We can't do that again, and so *Crawler* was how can I really challenge myself and be scared? We created this landscape of songs that were really different but also sounded like they were from one entity. It was dark, it sounded like a car crash and it went through all these different traumas. I was in therapy, so through that reflection came a lot of introspection and time to understand how I got there, which is not something I'd done before: to really appreciate all the traumas that have built me and made me stronger, or at least the recoveries that have made me stronger. And that's where the album was born from. The other three were very perpetual motion, churning out songs, on tour, thinking about the live aspect of every song and how the rooms were getting bigger, the songs were getting bigger.

How do you balance your creative vision while making sure the songs travel well in these larger venues?

I've cited this before, and it's definitely Bowie that said it, but it's like, as soon as the artist writes for the crowd, they're lying, they've lost. We realized that it was a really good opportunity to

understand that music isn't benevolent. The message, although universal, for me was about saving myself. Art and music is one of the best outlets for feeling like you're part of something much bigger than yourself. So it was just a great time for us to realize that we need to write whatever the fuck we want to write and not worry about what happens on the other side. The best that you can give your audience is a challenge. The audience deserves that. Whether they like the songs or not is a different matter.

I think it's a sign of mutual respect to do that, to not just give them what they want.

If one person in a relationship is flourishing because the other one is subservient and just does what the other one wants all the time, that's an abusive relationship, isn't it? It's a toxic situation. What you're there for is an interaction. My album is not my album once you listen to it in your room, it's yours. And whether you like it or not, it's there. I can't do anything about that. The audience are the ones that elevate it to a new level.

Opening yourself up to that kind of vulnerability can be a challenging process. Are there any practices that you put into place to protect yourself while you're working through these things artistically?

If you're in therapy, you'll sometimes say something out loud that you thought for 35 years. And then when you say it out loud, it kind of manifests into something that you can compartmentalize and put away properly, because you said it out loud and you start to understand it better. You articulate it. You get it out and you do that before you put it to record. So anything I've written about, I've already processed somewhere else, so I can articulate it artistically. I would never talk about a person in a song directly, because I don't think it's fair. It's a one-way soapbox attack. Even admiration, they haven't chosen that. I've just made sure that I've processed what I'm singing about before I go to write about it. The catharsis is: I'll get it out, I'll talk about it, discuss it, understand it, and my way of compartmentalizing is then writing about it in a song.

What have you found most helpful about working with your band mates in terms of your own creative process?

There's an ego when you're in a band, no matter what part you play, and it's a really beautiful feeling to not try and do everything. You're part of a team rather than part of a band writing a song. It's like the goalie doesn't need to take penalties and although I despise football, I think that's a fair analogy. I'm definitely a control freak and I've learned that just because I can't do it all doesn't mean that [the song] isn't beautiful or it's not exactly how I imagined it to be. I've learned how to write songs democratically, I've never written them all on my own. I definitely write way more now than I used to, and I'm writing almost whole songs, but there's still just something beautiful about knowing that people will have your back in life, emotionally or whatever, it's the same with that. They'll finish [the song] off. And there's a lightness to that.

What went into your decision to stay off social media for a year (and counting)?

I'm in a really privileged position. There's other people that can do all of our social media, but it just means that I don't need to control anything. I don't see the reactions, and I don't need to see the reactions. I meet our fans in real life when I tour, I see them on the street, I make music and that's all I want to do. I love Nick Cave's *The Red Hand Files* and I'd love to get into something where there's a controlled way of interacting with people that are part of the community. But I'm just not there yet. I'm not ready for that.

Are there ways in which you try and navigate Joe the front person of Idles and Joe Talbot the person?

I don't when it comes to writing. I wanted to be as transparent as possible with the music, but as for performance: you know David Byrne's book, *How Music Works*? He got the idea for *Stop Making Sense* from Japanese theater where you can see how things work, but there's still a theater there. So, it is me on stage, but it's amplified. I un-think on stage. I try to give as much as I can to myself, but what that means is, it's animated, because if I did that in normal life, I'd be exhausted. I want to be one of life's cheerleaders and really fucking perform those songs as humanely as possible. I'm not acting, but I give everything I can.

Do you remember the moment you felt that Idles was successful? And has your idea of success changed?

I think when we wrote "Queens" for *Meat*. It sounded violent. I was writing more poetry then and I started becoming more factual and distilled after that. But there was a point where I wrote the lyrics, and the music matched it and it felt really visceral and exactly what we set out to write. That was the first time I was like, "We've done it, we've finally done it." It's hard to explain, but the best way to describe it is someone who can't draw, like me, is asked to draw a car. I know exactly what a car looks like, but I can't draw that. And that's the same with a song. There's five of you in a room and you know exactly what you're trying to do, and you're all like, "This is not fucking it. What is wrong with us?" But then it's because you're trying too hard.

"1049 Gotho" is another example—we must have written that in about an hour. It's just this moment of magic. And that's success to me; when an artist sets out to do something visually or sonically or just viscerally, there's an energy that they have and they want to put it out to the world, and it looks or feels or sounds like they set out to do. That's success. And we don't hit it every time. So when we do, that's success. It's irreplaceable. We are monetarily successful, we pay ourselves a rate, we're a limited company. We tour to fuck doing over 290 shows a year, saving that money, paid for our own albums. But none of that would exist if we didn't have that drive to get those moments of success in artistic language.

When you're touring that much, how do you nurture your health and your creativity?

We know that the show is the most important element of every day, so we respect that. In lockdown, I wanted to be better when I returned. So I started boxing and cycling about a hundred miles a week. I got a personal trainer for about three months before tour, so I could be like a fucking animal on stage. I wanted to be the fittest I've ever been, because I played live for so long and it was beautiful. I was doing hour and 45 minute sets, and it was just like, I was ready for another one.

I think one of the things is balance. Sobriety was a really beautiful thing for me and I was really spiraling, psychologically, fucking on the edge before lockdown. So sobriety really helped, but I realized that it's balance. I was scared of alcohol and what I should've been scared of was myself and the bullshit that I was being cyclical with. And now I can drink, I can have a couple beers and stop, which is great. Creativity never comes from being numb. Obviously some of the best albums have been written by smackheads but that doesn't mean that the heroin was helping them. I don't think it has. I just think it was their turmoil and their ability to articulate their turmoil beautifully. I'm just better when I'm vivid and I'm better when I'm lucid. It was just about finding the confidence to be myself and not hide from being myself through numbing agents.

Has there been anything you've learned over the course of all these albums about your own creativity that's been really surprising to you?

Definitely with *Crawler*. Not with the others. What I realized is that I was always being too strict. I'm very much a person that's black or white but there's a million ways to write a song, and they're all great. I'm not always angry, so why do I always shout on records? There's no nuance in that and that's why critics were getting so wound up about my personality that they thought they knew, because I'm just shouting all the time. That's not what I'm like. I'm a very calm person, I'm loving and I have complexities like everyone else on this planet. Each song deserves to be treated individually and there's a different way to sing it, and there's a different way to write it.

So half the album I wrote at the vocal booth with *Crawler*, but I started having conversations with [Mark] Bowen before the song was finished about what I was going to sing about so that he could write in different ways. It's about being almost subservient to the song and knowing that you're not more important than the song. The lyrics aren't more important than the song. Again, it's like that dissolution of the ego. Allow it all to be part of the process and know that you're just one part of it, and sometimes you come before, sometimes you come after. It was cool to learn that there's different ways of writing a song, writing lyrics, and that I can do anything I want, and it might work. Or it might not, but also, failure is just part of the process.

Is there a piece of advice or other creative practice that you've witnessed from someone else that has really stayed with you?

My father, really. I think, basically, success comes from achieving your own artistic fluency. Being able to speak your own artistic language will set you free. I think no matter how many people buy your painting or buy your records, if you can sit there and really articulate yourself beautifully, then you've won and you'll die happy. But to get there, as Picasso said, right, inspiration will find you but it will only find you working. And I think the best thing you can do is just make sure you're the hardest working person in the fucking room forever. Just never be the second, and you'll find it. You'll find that magic that you're looking for, but it's not going to find you sat on your arse watching TV.

Joe Talbot Recommends:

Listening to Mandy, Indiana

Boxing

Reading Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

Cycling

Listening to Gustaf

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