

On working hard to remain a beginner



Musician Jorge Drexler discusses not being afraid to be lost during the creative process, accepting and learning from failure, and respecting the blank page.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2246 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Failure](#), [Inspiration](#).

What were your artistic and creative goals when you started?

I was not very ambitious at all. The year I finished my medical degree, I released my first record. The record company in Uruguay said, "Oh, it's 1992, it's too late for a vinyl and too early for a CD. So, you have this cassette," and that was all I got. I got that tape cassette sold 33 copies, my first release, and I was very happy.

I personally knew 31 of the 33 people that bought the record, but there were two people that I didn't know. So I said, "If you can convince two people, you can go wherever you want." I was only looking forward to placing my little cassette on the shelf of the Uruguayan singer-songwriter's tradition. I wanted to add something. I thought, maybe in 50 years, when somebody studies what happened with Uruguayan songwriting in the '90s, my music would pop up. If there was a list of unexpected, little-known artists, I wanted to be on that list.

I worshiped the singers/songwriters from the older Uruguayan generation. I wanted to emulate what they did and put one record in that line. I actually paid for my first two records with what I earned working as a doctor. The first one, before graduating and I worked in a clinic, and afterward, too. So, never in my wildest dreams, did I think things would go this way.

I've seen you mentioned that, for you, writing generates a crisis. Can you elaborate on that?

Writing generates a crisis almost every time I face it. The creative process is the passage from the nothing, the non-existence, to the existence, to something on the blank page. That transition from nothing to being, it's the most interesting part when you really try to start from a real nothing, a real void. I take the void very seriously and the blank page very seriously. I try not to rationalize the writing process. I try to leave at least the start of the writing process to the irrational and subconscious part of my mind. That involves depending on a very unreliable source and background.

It's unsettling, and I think it's a good sign. I get lost on purpose when I write and it's good for generating a void and starting from a real nothing, but it's very bad for your day-to-day life. I'm bad company while I'm writing. I'm very obsessed with what I write. I find myself happy without a reason, sad, or depressed just because I didn't solve that verse and it's not that important, but it looks very important when you write.

And, I really worship the blank page. If you see the cover of my last record, it's a blank page. It's completely white. The set in our live shows, it's a completely white set, like a blank page, too. So, I'm really in this moment of my life, when I have a huge respect for blank pages.

What happens when you finish what you are writing? Are you able to let go? How do you know when something is finished?

I keep messing with it until it gets to the mix table. Sometimes you can't just change the whole song, but maybe I can change a verse in the very last moment or a chord or the introduction to the song, or the song's order, some fade-ins or fadeouts. It's a tough process letting go, saying, "This is it. It's going to be this way. There were multiple choices, but we've chosen this one." But it's also a relief because it means you stop wondering. You stop thinking about it and you just let the songs find their own way and say goodbye to them and hello at some point because you're going to start playing them live and it's a way to actually get to know your song once you finished it. I usually know. It feels like a release to let go of a song.

You have mentioned that usually, when you write songs, one important part for you is to play them with your family and friends and hear their impressions and how the songs come to life, but during the pandemic, that part was lacking. How did that impact your creative process?

I wasn't able to finish a song for almost two years. I got to this point where I realized that I always thought that I play live with other people, with a band, and with the audience, but I write alone. I didn't realize the meaning, the whole complete meaning of loneliness until I got isolated in a pandemic and then I was in another level of being alone. I like people and suddenly I realized that I wasn't able to show anybody what I was writing. It wasn't really about the feedback. It's not that I was waiting for somebody to tell me this is good or this is bad. It's just that playing in the presence of another human being would sharpen my communication.

I don't know how to explain it in another way, but when I have somebody in front of me, the problems that I was always delaying, like "I will solve that chorus" or, "maybe we need another part, but I'm not sure. I will show it later." I was always procrastinating the ending of the song and whenever I had to show it to somebody. I had no other choice but to finish the song and make a decision. During that time, I was writing a lot, but since I couldn't finish the songs, I had the feeling that I wrote a lot but I had nothing.

So, it was a very stressful year for me. I got this feeling I lost it. I was writing a lot, but I didn't get anywhere and suddenly I said, "It's not that I didn't get anywhere. I didn't get to finish the songs because I needed this communication." Communication is like a rope that you tense from both ends and you have to pull and somebody has to pull in the other direction. If you pull alone, you just take the rope with yourself and you don't get that tense cable that transmits information back and forth. It was only when I started to get together with other people, some colleagues, and friends that started to come to the studio, that I was able to think that I could finish what I was writing.

You just said you wrote a lot, but had nothing, and then there is also this notion of the void of the blank page that you mentioned earlier. So it's kind of the void of having nothing, and the void of having work, but nothing that you consider valuable.

I know what you mean, but there are two kinds of voids, the one that you work with and the one that you bear. I work with and try to generate a void. I pick up the guitar and I let my mind wander until it gets distracted and suddenly it lost its purpose. It's just wondering between one chord and the other, one subject or the other, or maybe I would just be distracted watching a film and something moves me, or the light in the window and then I let that feeling guide me. I always use this metaphor. It's like getting into a garden at night and suddenly perceiving a perfume of a tree or a flower. You don't know exactly where it's coming from, but you know there's something there, so you start sniffing around until you find it. You get closer and closer to the source until you identify it. That's the way I write. What I mean is that suddenly something crosses my mind and I just follow that. I try not to lead at the beginning. I try to follow and then whenever I find that I take, I use reason and I organize. I say, "Wait, I need a second part with the same structure. I need a bridge. I need a chorus. Let's go. Let's move to this place. Let's change this rationally," but the core has to be subconscious.

Those are the songs that I like the most. That's why void is useful to you. To get distracted, to have nothing in mind, but then when you start putting songs inside your bag that you found and you look inside the bag and you don't see any song that you like, it's another kind of void because it's a void where it's full of things. So,

it's not that I didn't have anything. I thought I had bad songs.

Would you consider having a bag of bad songs a failure or a waste of time?

Failure is part of the creative process. Maybe the most important part. Making a mistake, failing, and having the fear of failure. You only get that feeling when you are really exposed and you write better, in my opinion, when you are exposed to everything, exposed to feelings, exposed to mistakes, and exposed to failing and having to come back and search for another way. I like to think that I'm still able to make mistakes because I've been writing songs for 30 years and I could always use my expertise. I've written many, many songs, hundreds of songs. So, I won't deny that I have expertise. I know how to do it, but I prefer to let that knowledge, and that know-how rest for the beginning of the writing process. At least I try to. I want to be professional at the end of the process when you have to put some order in things—with rationality, and with your cortex—but I prefer to write from a deeper place at the beginning.

There's this metaphor that I like very much that I read one of Italo Calvino's books. He was talking about the Medusa Greek Myth, the woman with the snakes in the head that whoever looks at her directly becomes a stone. I like to think about that. Italo Calvino said that success was the Medusa. If you assumed your success and you looked it in the eye saying, "I deserve this, I am this, I succeeded. I'm a successful writer." If you look at it in the eye, you become a statue of yourself. You become of stone, you become rigid.

I try to avoid looking at the success of some writing that I had these past 30 years. I try to forget that and to place myself in danger and at risk like a beginner. The new record is full of the concept of trying to be a beginner again. It's difficult to be a beginner when you are 57 and you've been writing songs for the last 30-something years. It's an ambitious task and I'm happy with what I got. I mean, I took a certain amount of risks in the record, which I'm happy to do. Lots of the songs didn't work out, but people won't see the battles I lost with the blank page. The audience will only see the 10 battles I think I won, which I thought I won because later some of the songs just go to oblivion, but some of them remain with you and that's good.

We just talked about success and how it has the potential to make you rigid, but you also just mentioned being happy with what you got. Could that also be a definition of success in some way?

I think they are two very different things. Trying to be happy is a good motive in life. There's a difference in Spanish. It's a very good one. Being happy is a transitional state and I think you should look forward to it knowing that you will not always be in that state. I don't really believe in happiness as a degree that you achieve, you can illuminate it for the rest of your life. I think that happiness, it's like a tightrope walker. Where you try to be in the center, but you're never in the center. You try to be around it and you're happy if you can walk over it and then you fall sometimes and you get back to the string. So, that's the way I see it. Success, it's another concept, and I very much like going to the origin of the word, to the [etymology of the word, especially in Spanish.] ([https://spanishetymology.com/exito-and-exit/#:~:text=The%20Spanish%20%C3%A9xito%20\(%E2%80%9Csuccess%E2%80%9D,\(surprise%2C%20surprise\)%20exit.\)](https://spanishetymology.com/exito-and-exit/#:~:text=The%20Spanish%20%C3%A9xito%20(%E2%80%9Csuccess%E2%80%9D,(surprise%2C%20surprise)%20exit.))) "Éxito" (success) comes from the Latin root of "Exitus." It means the way out, the exit, the end of the process. So I think success, it's actually the end of the process, and I love the process. Why would I like it to end? Why would I like to become a statue of stone of myself? I prefer to be a dynamic, liquid being.

Jorge Drexler Recommends:

Book: *The Netanyahu's*, by Joshua Cohen

A couple of songs from new artists: "Mandela Place", by pablopablo and "Lannisters", by Meritxell Neddermann

Movie: *El Buen Patrón (The Good Boss)*, by Fernando León de Aranoa

Artist to listen to: Noga Erez

Bonus track! Buenos Aires club Local Support

Name

Jorge Drexler

Vocation

singer, songwriter

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