

On keeping the joy in what you do



Musician Justin Hawkins (The Darkness) discusses finding your audience, pursuing every idea, and the importance of failing.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2960 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#), [Failure](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

How would you describe your artistic philosophy?

It's objective based. I see finish lines. The completion of a body of work is the finish line that I'm chasing, and time is no object. It's completely elastic. It takes as long as it takes, and I think the pursuit is basically tangential meanderings: Explore everything and just see what feels good. A lot of the time, it's just wasted time. But I've come to realize that the best way to spend time is to waste it, especially when it comes to creative stuff.

You have to audition every whim, everything that occurs to you, even if it's a passing thought. You can't ignore anything. You've got to chase everything because you never know what fruit it might yield. It could be something for another project later on.

I'm obsessive and compulsive about this. I've recently had a diagnosis for a ruminatory obsessive condition, which can be brilliant for creativity. I get loads done. But in the idle moments, I struggle. It's a mental health issue, and I've got an option: I could medicate it, or I could just ride it. I've decided to ride it, and as such, I'm doing two albums a year and a load of other stuff for YouTube. So, yeah: Time is no object, and you can't ignore any of your thoughts. You have to explore everything. Leave no stone unturned.

When you're writing a song or an album, are you always looking to challenge yourself or try something new? Or are you simply concerned with making the best thing you can make?

I think everything's on a song-by-song basis. For example, on this new Darkness record, there's a couple of things that would probably pass as country in some realms, and that's really because that was the best way to put those ideas across. We tried everything, but it felt best that way.

Sometimes stuff that you know is shit, it still feels good. The best example on this record is "Rock and Roll Party Cowboy." Obviously, you can tell by the title it's shit. But it was called "Rock and Roll Cowboy" for a while, and then we spent a year trying to develop that. We tried to add melodies. We tried to change the chord structure. We tried to make that riff so it's less prominent so we can actually build a song around it 'cause there's not much you can do with a riff like that—it just eats up the whole song. Eventually, we realized that the riff is so powerful that *that's* the thing. Then I added the word "Party" and *boom*—massive hit. It's probably going to be the opening track when we tour. It just is what it is, but we had to go through the whole process of figuring that out.

My favorite song on the new album is "Walking Through Fire." It's a comment on the music business, but you're

also talking about why artists pursue art in the face of obstacles—including, maybe, common sense. Tell me about it.

So, the first lines are, "Next long player, coming out soon/I'll be honest, I'm under the moon." And that is how I feel. At the end of the completion of a body of work, that dopamine thing is so fleeting. It's almost like I dread the last note that I'll play or sing because then it's like, "Oh, fuck—now what?" Well, now you've got to promote it.

The goal posts will have moved four or five times during the process of making that record. You won't know what success looks like. You don't know how to quantify what the metrics are to tell you whether you've done a good job or not. You don't know. People don't buy records anymore, but you've got streaming, and who cares about streaming? People my age don't. Then you've got to think about social media and interviews and stuff like that. It's like the real work starts when you finish recording.

There's a line in the song where I say that I don't think my mum bought the last album. And it's true: I don't think she did. We're playing to what is a cult audience. We've grown, but not exponentially. The growth has been stunted somewhat by things like our age, but our fan base is growing with us, and they're inclined to come and see us live. But beyond those people who are the hardcore, we don't really make much impact, I don't think.

You feel like you're not necessarily gaining new fans.

The creative endeavor is like, "Well, are we going to just play to our audience, or are we going to try and broaden stuff? Are we going to try and cross over like we did in 2003?" But the thing about 2003 is that we couldn't help but cross over. It was just this zeitgeist thing. We didn't mean to do that. I wasn't planning on being a household name in England. I had no idea that was coming, and I wasn't prepared for it. It nearly fucking killed me. So that's not what we're trying to do. But then, what is?

You realize that actually it's just playing. Playing music is the thing that gives us all of the joy, all of the serotonin or whatever the fucking thing is that makes you want to do stuff. It's a thrill and you're in the moment and the rest of the world falls away for two hours a night. It's like, "Wow!"

In the olden days, I used to see my onstage persona as an exaggeration of myself, and now it's different. Now my onstage persona is me, and then everything else that I do is a subdued version of the real me. So, the only time I fully feel complete and like I matter is onstage. That's the only time. And that song is about the joy of that with all the bullshit that you have to deal with to make that happen. I think it's a bit like parenthood, where there's a very, very small percentage that makes the rest of it worthwhile.

There's a line in that song where you say, "We've always been making hit albums." The implication being that it's true for you whether it's true in the outside world or not. That attitude is essential, isn't it? Because otherwise: Why do it?

Yeah. And I think it's going back to what I've touched on about playing to your audience. On my [YouTube channel](#), I get a lot of people writing to me and saying, "I want to start a band, and I want my band to be big. What do I do?" And I always say the same thing: Find your audience. Whether that's geographically or on a particular social media platform or whatever, you've got to figure out who you're playing for and who actually consumes your stuff. And then you work out how to get them to invest in it in a tangible way.

What I've realized is that when you've been around for 20-odd years, the music that you make becomes the background. Your fanbase is like this society that you have a parasocial relationship with, in the sense that they think they know stuff about your life. They really don't. They haven't got a fucking clue. They think I drink my girlfriend's blood, or I'm back on the drugs and all this kind of stuff. The things that you see in these message boards ... my mum had to drop out of these things, and she used to be quite an active member of these societies and appreciation groups. The stuff she's seen has been so upsetting that she's decided not to be part of that anymore.

When I realized my mum was feeling that way, I was like, "Well, fuck our audience." And actually, that's how it should be. I feel like I'm really in a healthy place creatively because I don't care what our audience thinks of what we're doing. I just don't care. All I care about is: When I play these songs, do I feel like shrinking? Am I trying to hide behind my guitar or my mic stand? Or do I feel fulfilled by playing this stuff? And that really is the only way you can tell whether something's successful or not: How you feel about it when you play it for an audience. Even if you hate certain members of the audience—which every artist with any sense does—because they're just people at the end of the day. And if you care about what people think, you never get anything done.

I've talked to many artists and musicians who feel that their music or film or art or whatever they're working on is theirs right up until the moment it's released into the world. And then it's everybody else's. What do you think about that?

I totally disagree with that. I think it's almost like the audience inherits it. For example, I've got a pair of bathing trunks from the 1950s that my uncle gave me. Technically, they're mine, but let's face it—they're my uncle's. We spend two or three years writing the songs and recording the album. We put it out in the world, and if people want to listen to it, that's fine, but it's fucking ours.

It's our expression. It's our message to the world. It might be our journal entry. And by all means, read it—but you don't own it. Nobody owns it. Maybe we don't, either. But I really resent that sense of ownership that people have over the artists that they like and invest in. What you're paying for is the experience of seeing some fucking awesome musicians play, or you're paying to have the joy of holding a recording by your favorite artist. And yeah, you might own a copy of it, but you don't own the songs.

Do you read reviews? Do you care about them?

I love it when I encounter somebody that I respect, like yourself, and you say, "Love the album." I'm like, "Fucking yay! That's cool." But unless somebody says, "This is a really dazzling review—you should read it," I don't read them, actually. And even in the instances when I do read something 'cause I've heard it's amazing, I look at it and think, "Well, that's not what I meant." 'Cause always what I imply is never what's inferred, and I think that's the beauty of it, anyway. Whatever I'm trying to express, that's not necessarily the message that people receive. And I've come to accept that.

Have you ever experienced writer's block? If so, how do you deal with it?

To be honest with you, it only happens when I'm in a collaborative enterprise. I'll have a vast resource of untapped ideas or stuff that I've come up with. And if you go into a writing situation, there's an expectation that you'll come up with something. And actually, the more parameters that they put in, the easier it is. I was on a writing session with somebody that shall remain nameless. They had a tempo, a key, and some recent songs that they wanted it to be inspired by. It was really restrictive, but so easy.

When it's just a blank slate and you've never met your collaborator before, that can be quite challenging, I think. That's when you're trying to figure out if you're on the same page or even if you're in the right room. And it's hard, I think. Whenever that situation has arisen, I've just pulled something out of a bag of existing ideas and then that either springboards into some actual creativity or it's the thing we end up doing. And obviously I take a hit on the publishing, but at least I get a cut out of it.

How do you view the pros and cons of collaboration? When you write by yourself, you have total creative control. But when you work with others—whether it's your bandmates in the Darkness or any of the other musicians you've worked with over the years—someone might contribute an idea that you never would've come up with on your own.

Well, the con is if it's a collaboration which involves a democratic sort of decision-making process. If you have a strong vision and contrasting influences to the people that you're collaborating with, it can be really unsatisfying. At the end of a project you might go, "Am I collaborating with the right people?" But if it's a healthy collective that's been working together for 20 years, for example, everyone fights for every fucking note. And it's really exciting. It's like you'll hate each other during the day, but at the end of that day, the

thing you created together might be better.

But I know what you mean about pros and cons. I think working on your own is great, but I never really get further than sketching out a framework when I'm working on my own because I can't see the point. I love working with other musicians that I respect, and I think that they bring something special to the table, and the fact that it's stuff that I would never have thought to come up with makes it way more interesting for me. And even in some instances when I don't really like the thing, I might like what they came up with sometimes—and it's the right thing.

I really enjoy your podcast, so I've nicked a couple of questions that you've devoted entire episodes to. Some of these episodes were recorded years ago, so I'm curious if your thinking has changed on any of this stuff. The first one is: Is it impossible to be original?

One of the things that's come up since starting up that channel is that I've been doing some... I don't know how to say this without getting myself into any trouble, but there are some legal firms that are concerned with the litigious side of chord sequences, let's say. If you're going to write any sort of melody that's catchy or in any way usable as a hook or whatever, then you're going to be relying on some tropes. A hell of a lot of stuff ends up using pentatonic scales in the relative minor of whatever the major is, but I do think there are original ways to approach these things.

A really easy way to avoid those pitfalls is to not use a pentatonic scale. Use a harmonic minor, go for a ninth as your first note, and then you know you've got to make a decision: Am I going to go up or am I going to go down? You can't hold a nine because it just scares the shit out of everybody. It's really uncomfortable and it'd be too progressive. But it's a great starting point because it forces you into a decision.

I think writing melodies is always about plotting hitherto uncharted routes through traditional chord sequences. And if you're clever about it, you can find ways where the notes are relationally different to anybody else that's ever written a song. Because there's so many songs that are the same. So, one of the things that I do is I pick holes in claims because I can show you how stuff is different relationally. I've worked on some big cases, and I love that side of it. I feel like I'm a detective in some ways. It's really fun to draw on another aspect of this obsessive condition that I'm suffering from—and monetizing it.

Okay, here's another topic you covered: Why is failing important?

Did I talk about sports when I did that one? If I didn't, I should have. When I was younger, I used to play [soccer]. There was a time when I was playing for a good team, and there was a time when I was playing for a team that was getting thrashed every week. I found out a lot more about myself when I was on the team that was getting thrashed—and the camaraderie of that. And when we did get a result, it just felt so great. It was like there was something about the struggle that was really important to my development as a player—and a person.

I think that kind of priceless, invaluable experience is the same in music, really. It's a similar thing to the creative process: When you get an idea in your head, it's not going to go away until you realize it. And when you do that, you sometimes go, "Fuck, that was abysmal." It might be bad artistically, commercially—it might even be career suicide—but those are the things that you learn from. You've got to just try everything and see what sticks. Fucking stuff up is part of the fun.

Justin Hawkins recommends:

The Queen Is Dead by The Smiths: I don't know why but I'm obsessed with this album AGAIN.

The Hopkins Manuscript by R.C. Sheriff. With that giant 2032 meteor hurtling towards Earth, I'm reminded of this book. Time for a second read!

Atkin Guitars: They cannot be beaten. Especially the JH3001 model.

Neck tattoos: Not as painful as you might imagine, and you get that wonderful startled feeling every time you

look in the mirror. For a week.

Grado headphones: An immersive listening experience. I'm not sponsored by them, but I've been using the RS-1s for 15 years or more and I love that rich mahogany goodness.

Name

Justin Hawkins

Vocation

musician (The Darkness)

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Gareth Parker