

On making art for yourself



Musician Justin Pearson (The Locust) discusses survival mechanisms, subverting normality, and the need to create.

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As told to J. Bennett , 3201 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#).

You've been in many bands over the years, and you've also written books. Do you have a creative philosophy that ties everything together?

Yes, but I don't think I ever wrote out a manifesto like, "This is the philosophy that goes into these things." It's in my DNA, so it's part of the process. I have my influences, which I'm not saying are musical influences—I'm saying everyday life influences. I have the things that I'm interested in, the things that drive me, the things that make me do what I have to do for survival—not to be happy. It's not like I do this for fun. I have to do this to function as a human being on this planet. So it goes back to the DNA aspect, which is already embedded in the things that I do. I would assume that's the same for everybody that's creating some sort of art form.

So it's instinctual.

I guess so. Sure, you can go to school and learn shit. But I never did that. I don't want to sound cheesy, but it's like, "I didn't find punk rock; it found me," or something fucking dumb like that. But as dumb as that sounds, it might be accurate. There were all these things that led to me getting into the weird shit that I'm into. When I was really young and I was obsessed with bands, I remember thinking, "There's no way I'm going to be in a band, let alone one that people care about." And then it happened.

What drew you to punk rock in the first place?

Well, I think there's an important difference between punk and punk rock. Punk rock is fine to an extent, for some weird capitalistic endeavor at this point. But I think it started out a little bit more vague and wasn't as defined. Things that might not be qualified as punk rock or punk were, or are. In retrospect, I think there are people who I would say are super punk, but they would never identify with that term or that label because they don't understand that concept even though they fit the ethos.

I think one of your collaborators, the director John Waters, would fit into that category. He seemed to recognize a kindred spirit when he put The Locust's music on the soundtrack to *Cecil B. Demented*.

He's a great example. He's like a punk director or artist because his movies fit under this gigantic umbrella that has to do with... I don't want to sound cliché, like "fuck authority," but it's like you're going against these norms and you're trying to find a way to navigate something that's sincere and within the parameters that you feel are relevant. Because the thing is, once punk became a commercial success or whatever the fuck you want to call it, it started to become, in the mainstream, like a commodity.

No offense to people who play in those kinds of bands—the stuff I would say is punk rock now. I think that if you're able to still fuck with people and challenge people—including yourself—that's a good thing. That's

important because I'm a big fan of all kinds of different things, so why can't those things influence me?

I don't remember who asked the question or what context it was in, but someone asked Gabe Serbian, the drummer of The Locust and a bunch of other projects, "What hardcore bands do you listen to?" He was like, "I don't listen to hardcore. I just play hardcore." I think that was a really informative statement because a lot of people wouldn't assume certain things are punk or hardcore that might not sound like what you think of. I'm trying to think of an artist that is completely not punk rock sounding...off the top of my head, maybe MIA. It's like when you go to a record store, and you think the punk bin sucks. It's got the classics like, Dead Kennedys and Black Flag or Dead Boys or whatever, but it doesn't have the wider variety of ethical punk in it.

It's not about a sound so much as an attitude or an ethos.

Right. I was always tripping out on James Chance when I was younger, like, "god, he's playing a saxophone and wearing a suit but he's a punker." That was cool. But then you look at someone like Sid Vicious, who was like the poster boy of punk rock, but he was a heroin addict and wore a swastika t-shirt, which are two things that I think would hopefully disqualify you nowadays. But that's what gave us this launching point. It's a weird thing to consider.

I think of someone like Barbara Dane putting out a record called *I Hate The Capitalist System* in the early '70s. I don't know if you've seen it, but the whole cover is just that text. I remember seeing it and being like, "What is this?" It's folk music. There's no fast beats or distortion, but it's still some crazy shit. Even someone like GG Allin had to happen. That was very relevant. Even though it's seeped in what we would say is nihilism, I think it had to happen to get us through or to this point in the evolutionary process.

Or someone like Woody Guthrie, with his guitar that said, "This machine kills fascists." That was more than 30 years before the modern idea of punk was established.

Yeah. What would Tom Morello have done if it wasn't for him?

This leads us to another point that I think it's important to mention here. You've always found music with a sociopolitical message or consciousness particularly appealing.

Yeah, but I think a lot of times it's hidden. A huge influence on me as a younger person was Sique Sique Sputnik, which I think I discovered from the *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* film when I was nine or 10. I bought that album, and I was obsessed with it. I wouldn't say it's a political thing, but there's all of these underlying political messages, like having commercials on there and having this weird look like they're selling you a fucking hair product. All of it looked crazy. They had this futuristic, trans...I don't even know where to go with it. Their look was wild, and they sounded pretty wild even though a lot of their songs are the same—and it was very androgynous.

To me, those are all political moves without being like, "We hate the cops." Or burning an American flag or something, which is what I was all about when I was 16 in my first band. There were these other things that happened that were subtle but let you know that these people are on the level; they're fucking totally bizarre and doing all this wild shit. That goes back to John Waters: It's not like he was making political films, but the moves that he made as an artist were rooted in challenging the norms or changing the norms—or rejecting them.

What was the turning point when you went from someone who was just listening to music to someone who started to play music?

There were all these little things that happened. I had talked my mom into buying me this bass guitar when I was 14. My dad died, and my mom had this new boyfriend who was abusive. I don't really remember what happened, but it was on my birthday, my mom made me go back to my grandma's in Arizona because she was going on a vacation with her boyfriend somewhere. But I talked her into letting my friend Jose Palafox, who became the drummer of the first two bands I was in, come with me. I had become friends with him in the late 80s, and he helped me see the negative side of punk—like swastikas or Darby Crash wearing an iron cross, because that stuff was contradictory

to the things that I'm into.

Being back in Arizona, it was not very progressive. My grandma was cool, though. She was tripping out on the way we looked and shit, but she was pretty cool. We found out that Suicidal Tendencies were playing on the night of my birthday, and my grandma is pretty normal, so it was weird to be like, "Hey, we want to go see this band called Suicidal Tendencies." And we're both 15. She's just like, "What the fuck are you doing?" But I framed it like, "Oh, we want to go to this concert and it's my birthday. My mom just took a shit on me, so please let me go do this." She was cool about it, and we went.

It was a crazy lineup, too. It was Suicidal, Exodus and Pantera, which means that there were a lot of white power shitheads there. It was especially weird seeing straight-up white power skins at Suicidal Tendencies, who had people of color in the band. People would be sieg-heiling to the band. It was weird.

Jose had this sense of unease around all these white people, mainly neo-Nazi skinheads, so we were like, "Fuck this. We need to start a band that's super rad and against all this shit." Also, we lived in San Diego, a border city, so at the time we were dealing with a lot of racist shit here. We still are, but at the time it was terrible. White nationalists would hold these "light up the border" events where they would protest against people coming from Mexico. They would physically light up the border with headlights, and there was all this racist rhetoric. This is also around the time of Tom Metzger's White Aryan Resistance, which started in Fallbrook, which is close to San Diego. So there was a lot of white power shit happening. We wanted to start a band to fuck with people we felt needed to be fucked with. Which might not be the best reason to start a band, but that's what happened.

You came up in the San Diego punk scene of the early 90s. Now that you've toured around the world, what observations or reflections do you have about that early environment?

San Diego is different. It's not like Los Angeles where everything was set up for everybody. We didn't have the infrastructure for creative and innovative art. We didn't have the infrastructure for *anything*, really, because it's a tourist city and it's very conservative. So everybody had to invent their own stuff, like record labels like Vinyl Communications and Gravity. Even before that, there was BCT, which is Bad Compilation Tapes. That was just a weird guy who would get all these tapes from around the world and bootleg them, and you could buy them off him for a buck.

It was also interesting because the bills would be very diverse. There weren't five hardcore bands of the same sound, so if you wanted to put on a successful show, you had to try and grab people from different communities. I remember seeing Heroin play at the Che Café with a three-piece jazz band who were awesome. My first band, Struggle, played at a campsite where they had all-you-can-eat spaghetti. We played with a funk band called Daddy Long Legs, and I think their singer was related to someone from Fishbone. Then he gave a lecture. My mom was there. There were no real venues, so you'd just put shows on where you could and go, "I hope this works."

You've maintained that DIY spirit for your entire life. These days, how much of that is your desire to do it yourself versus the necessity to do it that way?

I don't know. None of that really makes a lot of sense to me because I still find myself doing things for the bigger picture, I guess—or I do things because it's an option that might amount to something. It might grow something. I don't want to go off on a weird tangent, but there's a misconception where people think you play in certain bands so you're successful—and that's not always very accurate.

I'm not trying to sound jaded or negative because I'm fucking psyched on the things that I get to do, and I appreciate it. But it's not like I do it for fun, and it's not like I do it for any sort of monetary reward. It's always done because there is a desire and a need for me to do it in the sense that it maybe helps with... I don't want to say my mental stability or something, but it helps with me existing on this planet as a human being.

I couldn't be like, "Fuck this, I'm going to just get a job at this corporation and work in a cubicle." That's fine for people to do that, but I can't justify it in my own head for myself. I'd rather just hustle and be poor

or do weird shit—or try to invent something or be super sketchy or do whatever I can to survive in a way that allows me to use my brain and feel comfortable with my time in life.

Many people create music and art for little to no financial reward, but much of the world still can't understand why anyone would do that. Have you given much thought to why you're totally comfortable with that idea?

For me, I think when I started playing in bands and doing things artistically, I did it with nothing. I didn't have the education. I didn't have any kind of financial backing, or if I did have financial backing, it was obtained illegally or unethically to some degree. I always would find a way to exist without depending on the outcome or the financial rewards of creating music or art. That wasn't the thing that I relied on to survive, to eat, to pay rent and stuff. Those things were already taken care of by other things that I did.

When I was able to focus on playing music, it was solely just for that. It didn't matter that at the end of that performance or that when the record came out there was a financial reward. It was like, "Let's just do this thing that we really enjoy and we feel is honest. Let's just do that and have that happen. And whatever happens when it comes out, it's fine." Because we weren't doing it for sales or popularity—we were doing it for ourselves. We wrote the music or created the art because we liked it and we felt that this was cool and genuine. It didn't matter if it went beyond the people that were involved in it.

What do you mean by obtaining financial backing "illegally or unethically"?

When we would go on tour, we would do all these crazy scams. When I was 15 or 16 on tour, we lived off of stealing. So it didn't matter if we were playing a show and not getting paid at the end. It mattered if we were getting ripped off or something, but it didn't matter if there wasn't a lot of money from the shows. We would steal out of these soda machines. They were everywhere, so we could get tons of money for free from Coca-Cola or whatever, and that's how we would put gas in our car or food in our stomachs. We would just steal the money, and then performing would exist as its own thing. If there was a reward, that was cool. But it was very rare that there was a reward.

I guess that kind of mindset has trickled into my 40s, but I'm not stealing from soda machines anymore. That being said, I've dialed in a way to function without relying on royalties because—let's face it—the Spotify royalty checks are pretty fucking stupid.

Do you have a regular job outside the label and band stuff you do?

I started doing publicity with The Chain, which I spam you quite often from. So that's one thing that I do which has allowed me to go on tour and still hustle and work. I started mainly to do PR for my own personal bands and also bands on my label Three One G, but aside from that I will work with other artists and do PR campaigns for them for pay, so that's a job. Then I do get paid from Three One G occasionally, and I do make money playing music at this point. It's just not steady income.

Your newest project, Deaf Club, is very politically and socially conscious. What are your goals with the band?

The goals ultimately are just to create this sound and make this thing that is enjoyable for ourselves and challenging for ourselves and interesting for ourselves. If there's a reaction that's positive or negative—if there's a reaction at all, then we're successful. But that's a secondary obstacle. We just want to love it for ourselves first. If people like it or if people talk a lot of shit about it online? That's a reward, too.

Justin Pearson Recommends:

San Diego Spaniel Rescue: I grew up with a Cocker Spaniel and have one now, named Captain. All dogs are awesome, obviously, but I have a special place in my heart for Cockers. The main person who runs this rescue is really nice, and I appreciate all she does for pups and that it is a non-profit.

Lipstick Traces: This book was the window to so many things that had influenced me without me even knowing. It

served as a device to show me the intersection of all these elements, as well as the effects that art has had on the world as I see it.

Foodshed: I met a local farmer named Rica in City Heights, the community that I live in. Since I got kicked out of my house at the age of 16, I've had a plant-based diet, and I have constantly been trying to better my diet, find ways to be healthier, and be more practical with what I eat. Meeting Rica has shown me not only the correlation with local organic farming, but the ties to one's community, sustainable farming, as well as feeding a diverse area with varied incomes.

Sunset Cliffs: This is a pretty massive choice from my short list, but I'm obsessed with being near the beach, and try to see it daily whenever possible. It's a widely uncharted world that holds a power that most humans ever realize. It has to be the negative ions that create positive energy.

Heartwork Coffee: I never drank coffee until I turned 40. Rob Moran, my non-related brother, opened a coffee shop with some friends and I pretty much had no choice in the matter. I had to drink coffee, and Rob helped me navigate the taste, quality, and culture around coffee. Now I drink it daily.

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Vocation

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Bart Kuykens