

On getting better over time



Musician and songwriter León Larregui of Zoé on developing his artistic voice, how definitions of success change as you get older, and what he learned from Blur's Damon Albarn telling him he didn't like his band.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 1863 words.

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When and how did you realize that you wanted to be an artist?

It happened when I was a teenager. When I was a kid I drew and I loved music, but I didn't play an instrument. I could draw and paint pretty well. And then when I was a teenager I saw my uncle's band in Cuernavaca, the city where I lived when I was a kid, and it just blew me away. I went with Angel, Zoé's bass player, and we were like, "This is what we want to do. This is what we want to do with our lives." We were like 14 years old. That's when we started making a band. We didn't even know how to play. We just said, "Okay, we have to learn how to play and make a band."

Besides being a musician you studied visual arts and, as you mentioned, you have always been into drawing and painting. How do all these interests intersect in your creative practice?

I studied visual arts, and then at the same time, I wanted to study film. I did the exam to get into film school, but it's really hard how to get in. Hundreds of people in Mexico take the exam, and they only accept 50 new students a year. But arts, in general, have always been part of my life. When I had the chance, I started directing videos for myself and for Zoé, too.

As you said, everything is connected. For example, for me, writing songs feel more like a painting. And, once I have the painting or the image or the song, it's like I'm done with it. I don't go back to it. Whenever I go to a party, the beach or whatever, and a friend is like, "Hey, why don't you play this song?" I'm like, "I don't remember it. I don't know." Because when I finish a song that's the moment I have to go try something else. Once it's written or composed, it's done to me. Of course, I revisit every time I play them live, but I usually don't play live instruments and sing. I just forget.

You have been a musician for almost 30 years. You have had a successful career with great achievements. I imagine with time there are a lot of expectations that appear. It could be from always staying on top or trying to reinvent yourself. Maybe that pressure doubles when you're the frontman or the main songwriter. Did you ever feel that you had to fulfill certain expectations, and how did you overcome them?

Yeah, of course. There are always expectations, but they are mostly my own expectations. For example, when I write songs I think if people will like them or not, etcetera. But I've been feeling in a good spot of writing songs for a while. But yes, sometimes you get a bit disappointed. I think it's a natural process. There are days where I just get away from my guitar. Sometimes I abandon my guitar for months and months. I guess that happens to writers too because we all get slow, we all get stuck or get blocked. Sometimes time goes by and you don't get

anything, nothing. And then sometimes it just comes back, then you grab the guitar and you don't think about expectations or fulfilling someone else's idea. At least I try to let it flow and then I need to be objective in the sense that I need to have that vision and distance to say, "Ok, this is good or this is bullshit."

You mentioned that right now, and for a while, you've been in a good place creatively. What do you think took you there? What was the process that allowed you to be in this place?

I think it's part of maturity. Many years of doing the same things, drawing from the same discipline leads you to discover your style. You realize you have your talent and your style. Also, having time to travel led me to explore and get insights into my own work.

I feel that I'm in a good spot and I've been writing a lot during this time and I think that my ideas are very good. I think it can be pretentious to say that I'm in the best moment of my career. But now I'm not afraid of many things that maybe had scared me before or I wasn't feeling confident about it. Before I wasn't allowed to explore many things. At the beginning I was like, "No that's not my thing," and now I can say "Okay, I like this, let's explore it." I even would love to do a soundtrack for a movie or even a movie. That's why I feel I'm in a good spot.

What would you say were some of the things that you were afraid of before?

Well, for example, repeating myself. Falling through formulas. Not being able to grow because I've never studied music. For me, writing music has always been instinctive. I hear something in my head and I just put it down and make it happen. However I can, I just have the idea that's actually in my head and put it down. So I used to feel like I didn't know much about music or that maybe I wasn't good enough. But now I feel like that education part does not restrict me, so I can just be free of that academic pressure.

You're releasing new music with your band and I'm assuming that each band member is living in different cities and going through different things in life and, of course, each one is developing and working on different things. How do you manage, as a band, to align all these creative processes and artistic goals and things that each one of you wants to achieve with your music?

We've been doing that for a while, even before we lived in different countries. All of us write songs and we work on them and we get together, we share our ideas and then we choose stuff. It's always been like that. Maybe in the first albums, I was the main composer, because these guys weren't writing songs, or weren't confident about writing songs, but now they do. We get together, we figure out and choose the best ideas, and then we develop them.

While I was doing some research I saw that one question that the media always asks you is how your band has managed to stay together. One answer that you gave that struck me is when you said, "Just like in life, you have learned how to focus on the things that matter." Can you elaborate on that?

I think that beyond our fame and fortune and even with our art, with our music, beyond that is the call of brotherhood. We are good friends and we're family and sometimes there can be disagreements but it's like in your family, you can fight whatever but then you talk or sleep it off and then you're fine. So I think that we are close friends and that is what keeps us together, because we love each other and sometimes we don't understand each other. We all have different personalities and processes, and it may be hard but in the end, but we are a family. We support each other through the process. We have a lot of fun, too. We laugh a lot, and we love working and doing music together—we love it. Playing together, and laughing together, those are the important things.

A few years ago, when you were just starting with Zoé, you were performing at a bar, and Damon Albarn from Blur saw you perform. After the show, you asked him if he liked your show and he said "no." Then he told you why and gave you some advice. How did you feel after facing criticism from him? Do you remember what he told you?

Yeah, of course. I will never forget. We were in this bar and they performed the same night and then Damon and

the bass player came to the show where we were performing because they knew the owner of the bar. Then after the show, we said hello, and I asked him if he enjoyed the show, he said: "No, I really didn't, I didn't like it." I was like, "Why?" and he replied, "Do you want to know?" and I said, "Of course I want to know!" He grabbed a piece of chalk and there was a board there so he told me, I'm going to tell you these things that will save you a lot of time. So he wrote on the board, "Girls who like boys, who like girls." All those lyrics. Then he talked to me about metrics and harmony and tips on how to write. And he showed me how to improve my writing skills. Then I asked him his contact info and he said "No, if you want to find me, you will find me." [*laughs*] But I never found him again.

What did success mean to you when you started and what does success look like to you now?

When I started I thought to be successful meant being on MTV or winning and going to some awards and touring. In the beginning, I thought that success was signing with a record label, and then I realized that it wasn't because singing with a label doesn't assure you anything, not even releasing an album. With success, you have to work it out, step by step. It's not something where you sign with a label and then there you are. No. Maybe for some people, it's like that, but for us, it's something that we built over time. That's another thing Damon told me, "Rock and roll is a lot of work, so if you want to make it, you need to work hard."

There are a lot of videos and footage of you performing with Zoé 25 years ago and you have definitely changed how you interact with the audience and how you present yourself on stage. How do you feel about seeing yourself at such a young age and what would you say to your 25-year-old self?

I'm still terrified but not as much as I was when I was younger. I was worried about presenting myself flawlessly and I had panic attacks. I was very insecure. It was hard, but then I started learning and feeling comfortable. At the beginning it was hard to be on stage; I thought it wasn't for me and that it wasn't my thing. I can write songs, but I didn't want to sing because I would get just so shy. Then I started learning...I just had to learn on the road.

León Larregui Recommends:

Essential León Larregui / Zoé songs

"Deja Te Conecto"

"Soñé"

"No Me Destruyas"

"Brillas"

"Locos"

Name

León Larregui

Vocation

Singer, songwriter, musician

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