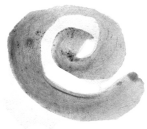
On maintaining creative relationships



Musician Matt Sweeney discusses confidence, different types of collaboration, paying attention, and creating and sustaining your lane.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2341 words.

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What was your initial vision of being a professional musician?

I was always very taken by bands. Something about having a successful relationship and then making music out of that. Which actually I've never said before, but it's definitely true. My earliest memories are seeing the Monkees and being like, "Oh cool, they're friends. They do stuff together." The Replacements were big for me in high school. It was always about relationships, even though I recognized the individual songwriters. I thought Paul Westerberg was the coolest guy ever when I was 15, but it was about what he did with other people. Whatever sort of dreamy shit I had in my head as a kid playing music didn't involve me being alone on the stage.

You're more tapped into what's happening collectively.

Yeah, probably even more so now. My mom remains a very keen music listener and my grandmother (she's gone now) did, too. They both loved accompanists when I was young. I grew up hearing "Check out the accompanist, listen to the accompanist." They were always telling me to pay attention to them. I was forced to be aware of them and learned quickly that the person who is framing the singer is very important. Even the term accompanist I only know well because I heard my grandmother and mom say it as a child. Because of that I've had a slightly more developed sense of it when I was tasked to be one.

When was the first time that happened?

Chris Harford was the first guy to say, "Hey, you're a good guitar player, I want you to play on my songs." I was 19 or so. Chris had gotten signed to Elektra, so he had a budget and flew me down to New Orleans. That was my first time stepping into that role. I'm sure I was a fucking nightmare. I had no idea what I was doing.

Did he give much feedback?

At one point Chris said, "Don't play when I'm singing, play after or before me…play around me." That was pretty huge advice. I'm sure it was utterly necessary because I was stepping all over his shit.

Not playing on top of the vocal was something I picked up from watching you host *Guitar Moves*.

Oh, sick.

I always noted how quickly you made your guests feel comfortable. There was a balance of seriousness and humor

that allowed for an authentic dialogue. Has this always been a strength of yours?

It's something that I developed. I don't think I was ever that great to play with until I had to change. The guys in Chavez were really patient with me. By the time Will asked me to play, I was in my late twenties so I was a little more mature. After [Chris] Harford, I made records with my friends, but the next time a professional musician asked me to play on a big record was Rick Rubin asking me to play on fucking Johnny Cash or Dixie Chicks albums.

Damn.

I had no clue what to do, nothing. But I'd had years of listening to music and certainly years of playing with Will, so I felt like I could do it. I was at least sort of prepared. That taught me how to sit down and be comfortable in a new situation and also make others comfortable.

By the time I did *Guitar Moves* I wasn't aware that I was drawing on it, but it's exactly that. Each episode I thought this is a session, we're sitting down and we're spending time together. I'm going to give you every bit of attention that I can, and hopefully have a psyched energy level. A format where you're sitting around with guitars in your lap, talking to a musician, you're just going to get more out of it. Especially if it's understood that I'm in the same boat as the people I'm talking to.

A common language.

Yep.

You tend to not listen to a ton of an artist's music ahead of a recording session, instead asking people close to them how they are as people. Does not having a preconceived notion of someone's sound help your approach?

Totally. With all my work with Rick, it would either be people that were terrifyingly huge to me, like Neil Diamond, or people I'd never heard of. Newer artists, or maybe established artists that I never checked out. In the case of Neil, it's like, how are you going to start? How do you prepare for Neil Diamond? How do you prepare for Johnny Cash? You can't.

I figured I got asked because I have some sort of skill set and this producer is forcing the artist to have a blind date with me. The artist is being forced to trust me and this artist trusts Rick Rubin. So pretty much every time I would come in, which is hilarious to me, it would be someone like Neil Diamond looking at me like, "I know what the fuck I'm doing?"

He'll be like, "Great to meet you. I've heard great things about you." And I'm thinking, "Oh my god, I cannot." Neil doesn't know that I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm going to act like I do because Rick thinks I do. Which is just all to say that it's about being confident.

The way I would be confident in these sessions was something that me and a friend of mine had talked about. When you're in an unreal, completely terrifying situation, you just have to treat it like it's exactly when you're in a dream, that state where all of a sudden you're hanging out with Elvis.

In the dream you either freak out or you don't. All of a sudden you're hanging out with Elvis and you're talking and wonder, "Okay, what happens next? I'm here, this crazy thing is happening, this is unbelievable, so I guess I'm just going to be myself."

I'm not going to freak out about this person. Neil's not going to want you to be thinking, "This is Neil Diamond. This is Neil Diamond. This is Neil Diamond." You know what I mean? Everybody's just desperate to be dealt with in the moment.

It was Andrew WK who I would always talk to about this stuff. He was very into far out French philosophy. It

really did help, that line of thinking. It’s like jumping off a cliff. When you do it everything slows down and you can really pay attention.

Going back to the confidence piece for a second. Especially with high profile clients—how do you navigate when to speak up versus letting direction come to you?

You’ve got to know your lane and what you’ve been asked to do. Generally, like everybody else, I feel pretty fucking vulnerable and don’t want to fuck things up. If it’s a case where I’ve been asked by the producer to play guitar, my job is to keep my mouth shut and come up with something cool. If the songwriter says, “Oh, I love that.” Or if the songwriters or the artists have questions like “Should we do that part twice? Should we do it again?” Then of course I will carefully offer my opinion. In general, the golden rule is shut the fuck up and play and do not say a goddamn thing. If you have an idea, play it.

On the other hand if an artist hires me to produce their record, that’s a completely different deal. In that role I’ve been asked to comment on every aspect of the song, not just whatever the guitar needs to do.

You’ve carved a lane for yourself as a session guitarist/songwriter/producer. What do you still find challenging about being freelance?

It’s tricky. I’ve been fortunate that I’ve been able to pay rent and not have a boss since I was 30 or something. This is 20 fucking years. Looking back I could have probably been more efficient and maybe done more if I had my act a little more together.

There were times where shit was definitely slow. I had never planned on being a professional musician. I had absolutely planned on always making music and being somebody in music, it being my primary way that I make sense of the world. The idea of it making me money was never part of the equation. I met Bob Bob Stinson when I was 15 and asked him, “What’s it like to be in a band?” He said, “It’s pretty cool. I always have 20 bucks in my pocket.” That fucked me up forever. Looking back on it, that’s pretty much what I did, I figured out a way to almost always have 20 bucks in my pocket.

But I swear to god, I didn’t plan it. I just kept on getting asked to work on music that actually paid, but that didn’t happen for a while. I made money working with Rick, but he had never even heard Chavez, which at that point was what I thought of myself as: the guy from Chavez. Rick didn’t even know about that band. He hired me because he loves how I write with Superwolves.

Do you work better when someone else is creating the deadlines?

100%

You’ll find yourself more motivated?

There’s nothing like a commission to make me creative. As far as being self-starting like, “I’m just going to write a song every day,” I still haven’t gotten there and caught the little buzz of, “Cool, I finished a song.” That maybe happens five times a year, which isn’t too bad as far as coming up with five pieces of music, even if they’re 30 seconds long. To me, that’s plenty. Right now I’m playing with somebody like Will, who pretty much creates a undeniable, “this is a song,” every day. I don’t have that drive. My drive is different.

Some artists feel like they have to get to that place every day.

That’s the right way to be. I’ve found that discipline is the key to freedom. The main reason it’s difficult for me to be disciplined and come up with something every day is because I have a big ego and I don’t like coming up with shit that sucks. That’s what you have to do in order to come up with anything good, go through all the stuff that sucks. That’s just the way it is, period. Some days it’s easier than others. Inherently, every time I pick up a guitar, it’s like, “Okay, I’ve got to do something that’s not going to suck.” As opposed to trying to do

something great.

You and Will have worked together for over two decades. What's behind that creative longevity?

It's a good question. For some reason we really, really are sympathetic to each other. I don't know what it is. I often think it has something to do with our parents and the music that we listen to, books. I feel our parents must have had things in common with each other and the way that they treated us. We were both raised Catholic. It really is weird how quickly we established, "Oh, I know how this guy feels and thinks about a lot of things. From the second we started talking, it's like, "Oh, this guy gets it."

The first Superwolf record started with a challenge from Will—the idea being that he'd send you lyrics to craft music around. Had you worked in that way previously?

I hadn't, but we'd talked a lot about it. His brother Ned made records with other people's poetry. He had an amazing album called *Mother Goose* which I think is a masterpiece. Will and I love those albums. We were like, "What a great idea, how come people don't do that more?"

And it's a strategy you've returned to.

That's how I write all the songs. He emails me the lyrics first. The reason Superwolves holds its ground is because the lyrics are incredible. Will is fearless as far as what he's going to send. They're going to be very strong. Will can sing his ass off and is going to be ready for what I throw at him. If somebody else sent me lyrics, it would be a whole other fucking thing.

I know who I'm writing for. I know what we like and what we're going for. That's why it works so well.

Is there more pressure when you're writing for him because of the established relationship?

Are you fucking kidding? It's Will Oldham [*laughs*]! Completely. Will makes demands of the audience and of people that he works with. They're reasonable demands, most music doesn't make them—demands of I am a human being, we are human beings, we are paying attention.

You've mentioned paying attention a few times during this call. In your partnership with Will it seems attention equates to excitement.

Totally man. We're so keenly aware of each other, but there's still this idea of an audience that isn't us. It's being made with somebody we don't know in mind and is done out of respect for humanity. We're using everything we know to reach a person we don't know. It's a real person. They live and breathe. It's not just an idea. We talk about the audience, but haven't said this much about it to each other. It's like man, there's somebody out there who deserves something great and we're going to try to make something great for them.

Matt Sweeney Recommends:

Up In the Old Hotel - Joseph Mitchell
Trilogy of Life - Pier Palo Pasolini
Two Serious Ladies - Jane Bowles
Guilty of Everything - Herbert Huncke
Walking Through Clear Water In a Pool Painted Black - Cookie Mueller

Name
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Vocation
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