

On staying open and making the most of the time you have



Musician Mike Watt on seeking out different ways to commune with nature, what he learned from punk, taking on the different roles involved in playing with a band, and why humility and having a healthy perspective are key.

August 6, 2019 -

As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 3175 words.

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

You're an avid kayaker. Does communing with nature connect to your creative work?

It's an extension of some things in my life. I got a car when I was 16, so no more bicycle, right? That's for little kids. I bought this 10-speed for five bucks. Maybe it was my late 30s, and I started pedaling again. I was scared because I hadn't done it in so long. Go out there when there's no traffic, crack of dawn.

Anyway, I was starting to wake up earlier and earlier anyway. I was born with bad knees, so pedaling everyday started to hurt me because we got some hills in Pedro. It was kind of killing me... but I had this idea. I'm in a working harbor but at the same time there's lots of parks because we're on the edge of the land, right? So there is nature. It's a weird mix. It's like Malibu with hammerhead cranes. There's guys working on the docks and stuff, but most of the town is still conked. Things are there for me to listen to. I learned to listen. Start hearing birds, start hearing sea lions and life that's not just machines and industry because the bike was pretty quiet, but it was hurting my knees.

So I thought, what's the other way to move around and be amongst Pedro at the crack of dawn without killing my knees? What did my pop do? He was a machinist mate in the navy. He was in the engine room. I thought to myself, "Wow, why don't you be your own little engine room in a kayak?" So I started going out a little at a time and finally I made it to the open sea.

You only use the upper part of your body, so this gave my knees a big rest. I could alternate, one day pedal, one day paddle, and I could still be with Pedro. I got this connection with the water, that part of nature. When you're in it, she holds you. You're not just a passive observer. You're actually part of the trip. You're much more involved with nature in the kayak than the bicycle even. And so not just the ears being connected by listening, but also just feeling, being part of this trip, you know, this energy. There are certain kinds of energy in the ocean, like currents. You're dealing with a very dynamic situation. You have to be totally aware. The neat thing about a kayak is as long as you hold onto that paddle, it's kind of a balance bar. You learn how to balance, and eventually it gets compartmentalized where you're not thinking about it anymore. Your body just reacts. You can't freak out, especially if the wave is coming up behind you. You just got to trust.

Is this also part of your balance as a creative human, finding the time and space to tune in to nature while also doing what it takes to be a musician?

Yeah, when I hear you asking me that I'm thinking, "inhale...exhale." A gig is a kind of exhale, and then when I'm in the kayak, it's a kind of inhale. You know what I mean? I guess I'm putting on a performance for nature but in another way. I'm trying to coexist. I'm trying to go along for the ride. [In gigs] it's not like I've worked out things with my drummer man or my organ man, "Hey, when I give you this cue, you do that," like I get to direct the shot. You don't do that. In photography, the way I do pictures, I call them "eye gifts." You just got to be ready to capture the thing.

Now I know a lot of photographers, they're control freaks. They're posing you like a fucking Barbie Doll and shit. One of the Cabaret Voltaire guys, I think his name is Chris Watson, he got into field recordings. You can't conduct nature, right? You're just trying to capture her. Trying to build up a sensitivity in a way. You know what I mean? To admire and also to be part of the dynamics. There are energies that are incredible with the ocean.

You're kayaking a lot in San Pedro, in the harbor there. This is a space that has both natural beauty but also funky industrial spots.

Absolutely, it's a weird mix.

Is there something extra special about finding beauty and nature within an urban environment? If you're on tour in a city that's industrial, are you able to tune in and find those glimmers of natural beauty? What does that do for you, being open in that way?

Well, sometimes it'll break your heart. You're paddling and you see all this garbage. And then you see the sea lions and they're having to swim in this shit. Sometimes the toilet factor is really heavy. But on the other side, I can relate, like you said. The Stooges guys used to always laugh because while we were driving—we could be in Osaka or Hamburg—and I'd yell out, "Cans, hammerheads," you know? This detective writer Agatha Christie had a character, Miss Marple, and the way she would solve cases, she'd always relate the situation to her town, right? And I'd kind of relate wherever I was to the shipping containers.

There is something about relating, to get a handle on something foreign. It's to find out what is similar, and living in a harbor I feel kinship towards that. I feel a kinship to water. I look for common ground in my life situation. What I found about nature, it's a humbler and different people's towns are humblers. You don't know it all. You have to find out, you have to have somebody show you around or explore on your own or whatever. You're a student. You're here to learn. And that's what I really get turned on by, being in that kayak and being in industry and also in nature. There's all these dynamics. Things are always changing. The industry part really breaks my heart when it's foul garbage. It used to be worse when I first came here from Virginia when I was nine. Monsanto was dumping shit. We had no pelicans, no kelp, no peregrine falcons. But there are some pretty amazing things even with the industry. It is a trippy mix.

You have real pride for where you're from, but it never comes off as ego boosterism.

This isn't just for Pedro dudes, we can share. I've lived here 52 years but it still ain't just mine. I'm just a temporary passenger.

Are there benefits to being connected but not being in the cut? San Pedro is very accessible but you're able to kind of be on the outer edge.

That was a dilemma of the Minutemen but not for too long, because we decided about it real early. In the early '80s people were telling us, "Man, you've got to move to Hollywood." And so me and D. Boon had to sit down to talk about it. D. Boon asked me, "If we move to Hollywood, what are we going to write songs about?" And I go, "Well, maybe Hollywood." He says, "Right, so we'll stay in Pedro because it's close enough to play there."

The way we looked at it was Pedro, in a way, was a Thermos Bottle artistically. You know what I mean? We could preserve, some kind of thing that made us a little different from a cat who's writing songs about, even Wilmington, next door in a different part of the harbor. We still had something a little bit different. Not saying

better or worse, but just a little different. A little insulation but not too much. Still permeable so you can get infected by the other code. That's very important. Nature don't like inbreeding, you've got to watch out for that.

Now, of course, it's a stretch, it's a metaphor but I could see that happening. So you want maybe, not too close, but close enough. I don't think we should hole ourselves up in caves, but sometimes you need a little... Like in my first opera, when I was talking about the old SST [Records] days, it was like we were on one big boat, but the different bands were in different areas... some dudes were in the engine room, some dudes were on the bridge, some dudes were in the galley. It's sort of like that. So it's a dynamic for sure. It's always changing. But it's got nuance, it's got layers and also it changes with time and new people.

God, so many different people have moved here. Even a new punk scene came in the '90s in Pedro, around Raul Morales and my Missingmen. I got them in the band. In our days there were like 10 punk rockers for the whole town, and that stuff happens and it's okay. Todd Congelliere moved from Torrance, and gave up pro skating to start Recess Records. That might've had something to do with the Minutemen. So in a way maybe it was good we stayed in Pedro. Even for that matter, something out of our control, right? Maybe these guys weren't even born yet, so you never know. Again, another kind of humility that you got to have about this stuff so you don't got it all figured out. Especially in these kind of entertainment racket things, it's all about connects, but sometimes you draw the curtains a little bit so you can get something together to show a little later.

You have your own unique perspective, but you're also contributing to a larger movement. What's the importance of contributing your own perspective to something larger than yourself?

Yeah, absolutely. I truly believe there would've been no Minutemen, without the movement, without even us fucking bumping into Black Flag, you know? But on the other hand, music is something me and D. Boon did as boys, when we were 12. That's just the way we were together. That's why we really dug the scene, because they let something so personal still be okay to do in front of them—"Okay, come on, you got something to offer? You can play it here. You look kind of weird. That's okay. We do, too!"

I remember Joey Ramone telling me, "Punk is kind of like a big hay wagon. If you got something to bring, come on." And I just thought that was the greatest thing because that's what I always felt. They'd let me and D. Boon bring this really personal thing, even if it was strange and kind of insular—funny clothes, funny names, but expressing yourself, your way. That's what really attracted us to the movement. I think we would have still been doing Blue Oyster Cult and Creedence Clearwater Revival songs in the bedroom maybe, but I don't think we would've been playing in front of people. The bigger picture, the movement, it was really important, but at the same time it was good to really know the guy you were playing with. I didn't answer an ad in *The Recycler*. This guy wanted me to be his bass player. It was beautiful. And then the scene said, "Hey, you can bring your band." You know, it's a weird mix of trips, but they're all to me just as valid and kind of need each other.

You really honor the memory of your friend D. Boon. I know it's hard to have lost somebody so close. Does the desire to honor his spirit help you do your thing on a deeper level?

Well, kind of like with that nature thing, you know, it's a humbler. You're going to be joining D. Boon. Even if you live healthy, you only got so much time. You better be earnest. You gotta make it count, man! That was the hardest lesson I've learned in a strange way, because you can get a little full of yourself. You got to work on that on a lot of levels.

When I start doubting and stuff, and I'm lucky I got the momentum from the old days being with him, but on the other hand, I also feel this need to give him credit. I feel like what you're seeing is not just all me. You know what I mean? It just isn't. It's not fair to the whole story. When I think about him, one thing, it's gratitude of course, but the other is like, "Whoa, there's only so much time." Every time I get hurt, every time I get sick or one of my men do, I get to feeling that way, too. I'm bringing a drummer on this U.S. tour, he's a couple months short of 40 years younger than me. Ain't that a trip?

You're being inspired by something that came before and you're giving to the next step through your actions. Can you talk about the importance of having good teachers and acknowledging your place within a continuum?

You've got to make a leap of faith. You've got to really sincerely believe that everybody might be able to teach you something. You need a little humility. You gotta let go. God, especially on bass guitar, you know? You start off just trying to do a couple of notes, keep it together for your buddy. Then you do it a little longer—a few more notes, a few more notes. All of a sudden you play all this stuff and it doesn't really make for good basslines that aid and abet the tune. Well, for one thing, the physics is against you because of the low end and stuff. The more notes you play, the smaller you get. So actually, you figure out, you know what, it's more of a search for the right notes, not the most notes.

Somebody just picking up the bass, they can write a bitching bassline. I love that about the instrument, but you can apply that to a lot of things. I've been reading about old masters, like painters and sculptors, and a lot of these guys, besides having a patriarch, they ran schools. They got these guys, the helper people, finishing their projects but also getting turned onto stuff.

I was reading in the Miles Davis book, he's talking about meeting Tony Williams, right? He's like 17 years old but he knows this free thing that's happening in New York with Ornette Coleman and Archie Shepp and all this. So he's taking Miles to the gigs and Miles, not the most humble of guys, but he did let go enough and that led to *Bitches Brew*, all that wild, open stuff. That's what you got to do. You got to let yourself be open. Even if you got the circumstance of being around a little while longer than somebody else, there's still a buttload to learn, man. Life's a classroom. You never stop learning or like Buddha said, "You stop learning and stop living."

I always think about the Willie Nelson song, "The life I love is making music with my friends." It seems like there's a fluidity between your life and your work. Is it all one in the same?

Yeah, in a way. This kind of work, the collaboration... you get in the boat, you ride there, you get on the stage, you do it. It's so much different than Raymond Pettibon doing the paintings or something... It's so singular, you know? And my thing is so much about collaboration, but I do have to bring in the material. There are parts where I am like Raymond and then there's parts where I'm a rudder man on a boat. With The Stooges I was a keel man. With music, I used to think there were three, now I think there's four ways of doing it. One of them is you actually collaborate, like I did with D. Boon. I grew up with this guy, I never had to teach him any parts, right? I just played my part and he automatically came up with a part and me, the same with his tunes. Then the other way is you give direction, and I usually put my name in those projects so you know who to blame. Then there's taking direction. I first did that with Porno for Pyros and Jay Mascis + The Fog, The Stooges for 125 months, Tav Falco, and Mike Baggetta. So, that's why I think for me to stay vital in this stuff, I like a mixture of all those four different ways.

Look, society teaches victory. Winning is being the boss. But man, being the boss, I've learned there's lots of stuff you can't learn because of this situation. Like people can't tell you no without you firing them or quitting. You're never wrong. You're the boss, right? It's my balls, my bats, I'm going to go home. It's really weird. It has nothing to do with the interest in learning and growth. It's all about power or some weird shit. So if you really want to be healthy about this stuff, I think it's good to take turns playing different roles.

Also, I've talked to guys who *only* do the sideman thing, right? They call it sideman-itis. I never get to play my own thing, you know? And they're all frustrated and the music ends up just serving some kind of lifestyle and it never gets to become expression for them. That was very important for me and D. Boon. In a strange way, of course, playing together was the most strong thing, being together. But the idea of copying Credence and Blue Oyster Cult, it was like building models and then, when we were exposed to the movement, we saw you can use music for expression. It's not just about copying other people's songs. You can actually get something off your chest or "think out loud" like D. Boon called it. That turned a lot of things around for us. I only thought there was one way to do it, being with D. Boon, and then when I lost him I had to find these other ways. I think it's good for me to have different ways of doing this music thing. There's still a lot for me to find out on the bass. I find it more interesting to bring my bass to other situations than trying to master mandolin, cello, and the Alabama sausage whistle, whatever the fuck.

Mike Watt Recommends:

Richard Mckenna - [The Sand Pebbles](#)

Walt Whitman - Leaves of Grass (1855 first edition)

James Joyce - Ulysses

Dante Alighieri - Commedia

Richard Hell & The Voidoids - Blank Generation

Name

Mike Watt

Vocation

Musician

□

Mike Watt