

On respecting the creative process



Musician Warren Ellis discusses the key to successful collaborations, the meandering nature of the creative act, and the importance of not having a clue—but pushing forward anyway.

December 24, 2024 -

As told to Daisy Woodward, 2566 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

Ellis Park, a documentary by Justin Kurzel about the titular wildlife sanctuary you co-founded in Indonesia, has just had its international premiere at the London Film Festival. It was such a beautiful film—I found it extremely moving in so many different ways...

It's funny because I was obviously quite close to the process and it wasn't until I saw it in the cinema, once I'd kind of let go of everything, that I made my peace with aspects of it that were quite confronting for me. Like all things, and this is my experience in the studio and now my experience with documentaries, you set out to do something and at the end, it's nothing like what you imagined. But when I did finally watch it in a cinema, I found myself being very moved by it, and I was relieved, too, that it's not just emotional porn. It feels like it seems to garner a response from people for the right reason.

It was a really nice way to do it: to interweave the story of your life with the park's story—it felt very seamless. Was it always the plan for it to be so intimately biographical?

I didn't really read Justin's treatment because I was busy and I was going through a really difficult period. I don't know if it's apparent [in the film], but my life was as chaotic as it's ever been—I'm going through a separation, my parents are sick... I knew Justin wanted to look a bit at me, to give some context for the people watching it who didn't know who I was, so I wasn't just this guy who plays in a band and suddenly decides to do this thing with the park. He wanted to find out why I was doing it, and I understood that but I didn't really think about it. I just thought, "Okay, I'll turn up on the date, and we'll do it," which is what I've done with Andrew Dominik [the director of the Nick Cave documentaries].

For me, making this film was one of the most important things I've ever done because in retrospect, it allowed me to confront a lot of things that I'd done in therapy—it was like I was doing 40 years of therapy in a couple of days. Justin and I became so incredibly close. It was amazing. He treated me like an actor, he pushed me. At one point, he was ready to pull the plug on it because when we got in the car to go to Ballarat [the city where Ellis grew up], I said, "I cannot go back there." I couldn't walk into this conflicting environment that had kind of ruled my life for most of my life. And Justin said, "Look, we can stop the shooting. [But] I think this is a big moment in your life. It's a time of change. I would encourage you to go with it. We don't have to use any of [the footage]."

Obviously, the stuff I'm talking about is my family stuff. I had a total freak out about it later on—I made a decision I didn't even want it in there. But then I saw a mate of mine doing a film and the film's subject had seen it and said, "I hate it," and just threw him off the job and made his own cut. I'd been going like, "Fuck

that guy. This is your work.” And here I was doing the same to Justin. So I made the call to follow how I’ve lived my creative life, which is to be as honest and transparent as I can. I said, “Justin, this is your film, and I trust you.” And then I let go of the reins. For better or worse, I’m proud of that decision.

The moments that you have with your dad, who was also a musician, are beautiful. They give a lot of insight into your early musical experiences, like the story of when you asked him how to write a song as a kid and he took down a poetry book and set the words to music...

To go back to the question about the film: I thought we were going to make a film about the park. I had this idea to take the gum there [[a sculpture](#) made from a mold of Nina Simone’s chewing gum, which Ellis pocketed many years ago and also titled [his memoir](#) after] and we were going to have this journey. But Justin was really curious about why I decided to do the park. I said, “I don’t know. Wouldn’t everybody if they could?” And he goes, “No, they wouldn’t. I think the answer’s back there.” I do think it is connected. There seem to be a couple of main narratives that all converge.

You can see that in the way my father talks about the songwriting process, which is an incredibly mysterious thing... Somebody else might have said, “Look, you’re too young to understand.” [But he explained that] it’s just by jumping in that it happens. I think in most of the things we do in life, it’s really about rolling up your sleeves, turning up, and doing it. Then it’ll work or it won’t, but there’s more chance of something happening if you just take that first step and jump off.

That reminds me of a moment in the film where you’re talking about deciding to go ahead with the park and you say, “Doubts poison ideas”...

Yeah, it’s about trust. My creative life has been like that. I’ve turned up for things that I had no clue how to do—how to make music for a film, how to write a book—but I’ve turned up and pushed away my anxiety. Even if I’ve failed in the process, which I often do, I’m at least glad I’ve turned up. The park was like that and I was very fortunate that it led me to [Femke \[den Haas\]](#), the founder and co-director] who has been extraordinary to be involved with.

Do you think that mentality dates back to your earliest projects?

For sure. But I come from a very working-class family where a lot of decisions were financial decisions based on: “We just can’t do that. You can’t have that.” So I’m aware of the reality of things but I do think my father, although he was stuck in the confines of his job and the family, was always curious, and he allowed our imaginations to take flight. My dad was basically an artist, a creative guy that couldn’t find his calling on the spot, but he made his calling where he could. That’s a really beautiful thing because not all artists are celebrated; it’s the process that’s important.

I don’t think many people that succeed are particularly talented or skilled. To succeed, it’s about having the capacity, the potential to let that imagination take flight, and for you to have some belief in the process, and work your way into it, and not be shut down early on. That’s way more important than having the technical skills. Most people you talk to don’t have a clue what they’re doing, and they’re the beautiful people in the circles that I move in. You know a few more things after 30 years, but you still don’t have a clue, in a way. You never know if [successful work] is going to happen again. You just can’t assume it, and the people that do assume it aren’t worth much salt, as far as I’m concerned. You need to be in deference to the creative act.

How do you keep going when you encounter those inevitable moments of self-doubt?

Sometimes I cry, think it’s all over. I’ve had that a couple of times but ultimately, you have to push through that because you know from past experiences that if you drop the ball at that moment, that’s not going to help; you have to step up. Ninety percent of the stuff that I’ve done, I’ve had no clue at all what to do—it’s down to a belief in the process. And if you try and it doesn’t work, that’s not the worst thing in the world.

I learned a massive thing working with Andrew Dominik on [the soundtrack for] *The Assassination of Jesse James*. He didn't like what we [Ellis and Nick Cave] were doing and sent us back to the studio. Nobody had ever done that and if that score's good, it's because Andrew sent us back in again and made us work for it. I would much rather work with the people who go, "This is good, but I don't know about this..." My creative life is about collaboration, and the park's an extension of that. My work with Justin was a collaboration, too, and I see this as a film about the collaborative nature of the creative act, the fact that we aren't just on our own doing all this stuff. Nobody is. There's a whole team around us.

It all feels very synergetic. The work in the park is about people coming together to do something amazing with so much passion...

It's this beautiful idea that everybody's breathing life into and trying to help keep afloat. And the people that work there... it's like god molded them with his own hands. My time there—two weeks living in the jungle—was life-changing, one of the most, dare I say, religious and spiritual experiences I've ever had. I'm very grateful that it happened because I couldn't have walked into the things that I did after that—my dad dying, everything else in my life—without the type of filter that I have now. I went there thinking we were making a film about these wonderful animals but what really moved me was realizing that the most extraordinary animals are people when they put their best foot forward. There's good and bad in everyone. I've done enough bad, and I'll continue to do it too, but these are the things that remind us that we are good, we can do good.

I'm on tour with the Bad Seeds at the moment and the concerts we do are just the greatest moments of my life. Together, the audience, the band, and the technical team, we create something. There's this thing that's mutually inclusive. It's the sum of its parts, and these are the things we need to immerse ourselves in.

What other lessons do you think emerged from the film?

The film turned out nothing like I thought, which is the nature of art and the creative process. I see this across all mediums, you're following the stream and if it takes a bend, you go with it. Now, if you don't and you're rigid, there's less likelihood that you'll make something that's of worth. You have to let go of your better judgment sometimes and just let it go. I know for Justin this film [his first non-fiction feature] was a very unique experience. He usually has a script, certain things he has to stick to but with this, he really didn't. And the great thing is—and I notice this too when I'm making records and scores—you have these ideas but then actually a lot of the stuff you think is going to be in [the final work] is swept off, and these other little ideas that refuse to back down emerge. They're insistent, these little ideas that keep raising their voices saying, "Help me. Help me."

You mentioned the importance of collaborations within your career—like your collaboration with Nick Cave or the other members of the Dirty Three. What's the secret to a successful collaboration?

The first thing is implicit trust. That's not easy to find but when you do, you realize it's the trust—that you can do whatever, make mistakes—that means you can take risks. It's really about being able to take risks. But also I think by the time you've got together, it's not by chance. It's this confluence of streams: you've been immersing yourself in stuff all through your life, and other people have too, and then eventually you're going to collide because you have similar [interests]... I've been with Dirty Three for 30-something years, and Nick for 25. I've worked with Andrew, now Justin, and Femke. It's these long-standing collaborations that have given my creative life the longevity that it's had, which I never anticipated.

Did you know quite quickly with each of these collaborators that your rapport was something special?

I think I probably did. It's worth noting, too, that all of them—with the exception of Marianne Faithfull, who I did a few things with, Deniz Gamze Ergüven, who I did *Mustang* with who's French and Turkish, and Femke, who's Dutch—are Australians. Nick and Justin. Andrew grew up in Australia. Mick and Jim from Dirty Three. There's something in the water there... I think Australians have a certain Wild West approach to things. We're far enough away to create our own identity, but then you get out into the big world and realize you can compete on any stage. I only noticed this recently: when Australian art is working at its best, it's irreverent, it can be

funny, it can be poetic, but it's always serious—there's a seriousness about the craft.

Lastly, I wanted to ask you about the film's score—you're playing the whole thing, right?

Justin's idea was that he didn't want anything recorded outside of the film. So everything you hear is in the film, it's recorded with the camera and stuff like that. So when there's violin, I'm playing it and you see me play it, which I've never seen a film do before. With the exception of the studio stuff in Paris, which you're technically hearing through the camera, all the music is real time. Early on, I was in Ballarat and I was playing the violin in the theater or wherever and this theme sort of started up, and Justin was like, "Maybe this is something we can develop throughout." So by the time we got to Indonesia, there were these slightly different versions of it that were happening. I guess the film follows that idea of following a creative act—you see an idea from its genesis and then I develop it throughout. Then we went back to Paris and into the studio, probably a year after the initial shooting, and we recorded it.

I do like that the film shows the development of a piece—where it can go, and how an idea can take flight. I left that up to Nick and Andrew when they were doing the edit. I gave them a total 100 percent carte blanche to work as they wanted, because that's how people have let me work my whole creative life, and who am I to rip that control out of somebody's hands? Ultimately, the most important thing is letting people have their vision.

Warren Ellis recommends:

Beethoven's symphonies 1-9 in one sitting

Seven Psalms by Nick Cave

The Ascent by Larisa Shepitko

Rose Tattoo by Rose Tattoo—best workout album

How to Disappear—photos by Colin Greenwood

Name

Warren Ellis

Vocation

composer, multi-instrumentalist, musician

□