On the power of cooperation

Musician Justin Vernon, aka Bon Iver, discusses the motivation behind the creation of the digital platform PEOPLE, the importance of Ian MacKaye, and why you don't need to step on someone to get ahead.

June 21, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2776 words.

Tags: Music, Independence, Collaboration, Process.

What was the impetus behind PEOPLE? Did you feel there was a need for artists to have a space to share their creative process—to be able to upload early versions, take them down, post later versions—and to retain control over all of this?

All those reasons you just said are the reasons, and then there's probably 109 or 110 more reasons. I recognize that I'm kind of a voice for this thing, but in no exaggeration, we didn't create this thing by ourselves. I can point to Aaron and Bryce [Dessner] as two of the people that have been garnering this type of energy for a very long time—for probably the last 10 years. But then the Michelbergers and my friend Brian, and all my friends that I grew up with, have also been pointing towards this for a long time. There have been a lot of energies coalescing.

I'm not trying to be vague, but from the labels we started when we were kids, to the shows that we've been trying to start, it's just now that we're old enough to have enough power where we can start to put a framework up for this thing.

There's so many reasons why it's positive. There're plenty of musicians out there who have no idea how to sell themselves and, frankly, that's one of my skills. I was able to figure out how to drop my CD *For Emma, Forever Ago* in the right hands, or whatever the fuck. I think there're plenty of people who can publish things on this platform without being mitigated by, like, "Oh, I don't want to put it out before a label hears it, but if I don't put it out a label won't hear it… and then if they *do* hear it, it won't be coming out for a year after I did the thing, and then I'll just be sitting there with it in my hands," etc. It can just get really messy really quick.

We wanted to be there for proper record releases and things like that, but also unfinished work and works in progress. We thought the platform could act as an incubator where we can share tracks with each other as it grows. And maybe make new songs and just develop everything like that.

Throughout our conversation, I'm sure I'll come up with more reasons why we wanted to do this, because there are just so many. It's so needed.

Do you imagine this would be something that could eventually compete with Spotify? For a lot of artists, even though they're getting paid a certain amount from streaming, it's almost more important just to have people hear their music—so then maybe a label does sign you, or a new audience finds you and you can tour larger spaces. For a smaller artist, just getting the music out there, and having people hear it outside of their friend circle seems to be the important step.

Yeah. Definitely. It's often mitigated by other situations where it's like, "What's the point here?" "Why did you pick up a guitar in the first place?" "What's going on here?"Even me, who had a high level of success with a capital S… or maybe it's a lowercase S. [*laughs*] I don't know. I'm very thankful for all that. However, it didn't help my creative process. It slowed me down, it made me depressed, it made me anxious.

But to answer your question about Spotify, no. I don't think we're aiming to compete with anything. I think we're simply trying to fill a gap out there.

As a matter of fact, without revealing too much, there'll be parts of the music industry that we'll be leaning on from a post-capitalist, post-socialist perspective, where we'll try to be utilizing these systems so that they can be automated, so that costs of putting out records and vinyl can stay very low. The way we look at it is: put people in the studios, quit charging them tons of money, incubate their ideas, encourage them, put them in a position to succeed, and then the music will just get better and better.

We would never try to slow or impede anybody's progress for the sake of our own thing. PEOPLE isn't us against anything. It's us filling a gap.

As you were saying, success can lead to stress and impede the creative process. Do you see Big Red Machine or PEOPLE as ways to exist outside of Bon Iver? For example, when you as Bon Iver say, "I'm going to do this," there are all these headlines. Maybe this is a way to do some good, positive things without all of that baggage?

A hundred percent. On the Bon Iver side of things, or with the National or any of these bands, we've got careers. I'm not shying away from that, but it's kind of got its own momentum. I love Bon Iver; I'll always love the project. But I definitely have to leave it from time to time, otherwise it's just too much focus, and too much energy surrounding an idea that is just a band, just a project idea. It's not more than that.

So, absolutely. I got caught up in the early years. I did Gayngs and Volcano Choir and a bunch of other things with a bunch of my friends that were really, really fun, and then still ended up having a little bit of that vomit-y, "Oh my god we have to go promote this, fuck this, we have to go after another TV show" thing. For me, I just burnt out so heavily on everything.

With PEOPLE, for me, I selfishly look at it as a way to be able to work on a song and not be like, "Is this a Bon Iver song? Oh no."

I'd say I probably have above-average confidence in my own abilities as a musician or something—not above average, but I'm clear on that shit. Still, it doesn't stop me from being impeded by a bunch of shit that just wasn't inherently important to the music I wanted to work on in the first place.

There are a lot of conversations these days about what's right or wrong about the music industry. In some sense, you're creating a different path for other people, and maybe also for yourself. Maybe in the future, everything you do is through something like this, and you have your own system you've created?

Ultimately that might be cool. However, I think it's a path for me to expand my horizons within, and if you think about it, I just put, *For Emma, Forever Ago* up on MySpace, and I got signed off of that. You know what I mean? It was free. People forget that people just need to hear something for it to have its own legs, and it doesn't need to be on a fucking blog, or, "Hey, check out this link!" Goddamn. It's just so concentrated and over-flushed.

I hope to have an outlet for everything I do in one place. But, I also recognize that it doesn't need to be that simple.I spent some time being pretty angry about the industry and caught myself yelling about some stuff. I'm way past that now, because what's the point of that? The music industry brought the world music in a very real way. We're sitting on stacks of hundreds of thousands of albums and genres. It's all very good. However, the industry seems to have not kept up, ever. It's almost always mitigating and arbitrating things.

You were saying how this is a continuation of what you and your friends were always doing. Recently, this guy Forest, who books the artist Pharmakon, tweeted about how she has no social media, but she's managed to build this audience just based on playing live. She's built this big following without doing any of the normal things people do in 2018. PEOPLE feels like a return to, "Hey, this our community, we're just gonna put this thing out."

It’s about no compromise, too. I mean, people are really excited [about getting music to be their job]. I was so excited for many years in my early 20s. I wouldn’t fault anybody for having that dream. I also wouldn’t point them straight down the path I went. As with anything in our culture as humans on Earth, we must think about, “What’s the best?,” or “What’s the most normal?,” or “What’s the easiest way?,” or “What’s the most clear-lit path to success?,” and it doesn’t garner new ideas; it doesn’t garner new paths. It doesn’t help us understand what art is there for in the first place, which is to expand our perspectives.

If you think about it, many, many, many artists—like Springsteen, for instance—everybody had a crazy path. A very small percentage of the people that are out there being successful in the music industry did it in the “normal” way. You could separate pretty much everybody on how they got to where they’re at. It is almost always because of no compromise. You’re not compromising your ideals or beliefs or musicality.

Do you see PEOPLE as a corrective? I don’t wanna say “corrective,” maybe, but you look back and say, “These are the things I wish I knew when I was starting out and now I know these things. By having something like this, I can help people avoid the pitfalls I had or the things I approached that I wish I’d done a different way”?

Yeah, for sure. However, again, I end up talking to a lot of people about it, friends that are on this project with me, alongside me. It’s easy for me to talk about my experiences, but I wouldn’t want people to decide they want to have something that I have, just like they wouldn’t want me to decide I want something that they have. So, it’s different, and it’s not about me. This isn’t some kind of Tidal thing at all. This is a post-capitalist, post-socialist thing where there is no one face. Every person is gonna be different.

You’ve collaborated with a lot of people throughout your career. This feels like a collaboration as well. What’s so appealing to you about collaboration?

Everything is collaboration. Otherwise it’s isolation or solitude. I’ve been in a band since I was 12. It’s the funnest thing. Music, the language of music, blah-blah-blah. Insert every great thing about music here. [*laughs*] But, specifically talking about me, the collaborations have come as a need to get outside myself, because Bon Iver is such an inward-looking thing. And PEOPLE is even more than collaborative; it’s about trying to bridge a lot of gaps that have never been bridged, frankly, except in smaller ways.

I got to meet Ian MacKaye recently and go to see the Dischord House and the archives and everything. It’s just like, “Holy shit!” Dischord, and him—what they stood for, and what they meant to their community—it’s like, “Holy living shit; that is so important.” This is me catcalling Ian. But, I mean, why wouldn’t we take the Fugazi archive and put it on PEOPLE?

That’s what I hope for. I’ve been talking to my friend Joe Rainey, who lives in the reservation outside of Green Bay, and we’re trying to look at creating a real archive of Ojibwa, Lakota, Pow-wow recordings for the last 30 years.

That’s not gonna go on Spotify.

You’re releasing Big Red Machine, your new project with Aaron [Dessner], via PEOPLE. Do you imagine this existing through PEOPLE entirely, or is it something you can imagine eventually putting out on a more traditional label?

I wouldn’t wanna put it out on a label. I mean, I don’t wanna get into the super specifics because we’re actually all trying to figure it out right now, but I get along with my label fucking amazingly. Jagjaguwar looked at what Ian made and then expanded it further. I could see working with distribution and things like that, but in order to comment on it, you’d need to say out loud that it’s never gonna look like something we’ve seen before. So, Big Red Machine is a PEOPLE thing. We’re gonna get some of our friends in the industry to help us spread the word and to distribute some of the vinyl maybe.

There’re all these little tiny, minute questions that come in with a question like that, and I don’t know if people even realize that. I think there’re four songs out there now. We have a 10-song record that we’ll be spraying out throughout the rest of the summer.

We just wanted to put something up in the player for now.

How does the event in Berlin tie in? Was the concept for that like, “Hey, let’s have this community in real life. Let’s take it off the streaming platform and just have everyone show up and recreate the entire platform in flesh and blood?”

Yes, that is a great way to look at it. During a phone call, Aaron came up with the three rules, or the three ideals of PEOPLE. The number-one most important is free space. Not just free money, but free space for artists to create. And the second is events; changing what a concert means. Taking a little bit of the capitalism out of a concert and putting a little more of the cultural back into it; a little more of the, “Let’s go somewhere and be together and be changed.” And then the platform is, honestly, the third-most important.

So, these events, while they’re much more difficult to navigate, they’re very important. They’re a place for these people to get together. You can make a song over email, but it’s usually better when you’re in the same room. It’s important to still get random people together to create new music—to change people’s minds, including the musicians’.

This Big Red Machine thing *is* this PEOPLE energy, and that’s why it belongs there. And, I mean, there’re 40 or so collaborators on the thing. So, it’s just more realistic and it’s not so much, “Oh, who gets the king crown of making this album,” or whatever.

To go back to Ian MacKaye—it’s amazing how visionary a lot of that stuff was, and how much of it does overlap with PEOPLE. Cut out the middle person, do it yourself, and charge $5 for shows because it’s more about getting people out to have a community and documenting a scene than it is about making a profit. All that stuff feels especially important now, as things move more online, and tickets get more and more expensive. The current surcharge on a ticket is often more than a $5 Fugazi show.

Yeah. Yesterday I saw the Vivienne Westwood documentary preview. I don’t know a ton about Vivienne Westwood, the designer, but she said something like, “Honestly, I hate my business.” She’s like this giant designer in London, and she’s like, “It’s expanded too much.”

I thought about the same words that Ian told me once. I interviewed him many years before I met him for *Under The Radar*, I think, because I just wanted to talk to him. And I was like, “So, why’d you stop? Why did Fugazi stop playing shows?” And he had a bunch of answers, but the main one was, “I’m not an expansionist. I don’t need to continue growing.”

You look at our capitalist society and people who are so enthralled with themselves and their own stories because they’re afraid to die. They’re afraid to stop expanding, and need to piss on every bush that they walk by. You know what I mean? You don’t need to expand, you don’t need to become Walmart. You don’t need to do that in order to be successful. You don’t need to walk on others. You need to walk next to them to have a satisfying life.

5 things PEOPLE will “expand” into:

Visual artists will start using it
We will use the CASTS section to populate our conversations and personal thoughts
We will publish children’s books and zines and possibly BJ Burton’s book about Synesteia
We want to publish large archives of different communities music and any publishable material
We will collaborate with a very special electronics company to make a physical device connected to the platform called PEOPLE PLAYER

Name
Justin Vernon

Vocation
Musician, Producer


OKLAHOMA CITY

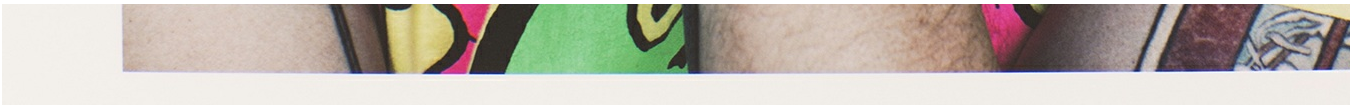


Photo: Cameron Wittig & Crystal Quinn