# Simon Raymonde on perseverance

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3418 words.

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**A lot of people know you from your work running Bella Union, but you were also a member of the Cocteau Twins. When your early career is defined by having been part of this iconic band, does that loom like a specter over whatever you do later?**

That's an interesting thing. I am generally a relatively positive thinker, and whilst I was very conscious that I didn't want to just jump from this amazing band into *another* band, I often asked myself why I didn't want to do that. I think it was because I knew how special Cocteau Twins was, and I knew that a singer like Elizabeth Fraser is literally one in a million, if not a billion. I was also conscious that anything that I did in the future would inevitably be compared to that band. If I have a band with a female singer, the very first thing anyone is going to think about or mention is the fact that it's not Elizabeth or that I was in the Cocteau Twins.

So it is a specter, in a way. It's a blessing and a curse. We had started the label just prior to the band breaking up, so luckily there was this thing in existence that I could throw myself into. I could temporarily ignore the fact that I was a musician for a minute and pretend that I was only doing this label thing. Then all of a sudden, we've been in business all these years and I'm like, "Oh my God. I haven't been making any music. What's the matter with me?"

I can see why with this new record that I've made, I haven't gone whole hog and formed a proper band with a singer. Instead, I created something that I can be in control of partially, but also have loads of options. We worked with a variety of singers and musicians and special guests, so it doesn't feel as permanent as a band, but more like a project that I sort of curate. In the bank of my mind there is still that question of, "Why do anything? Why be in any band at all, because no band is going to compare to the Cocteau Twins? But I've managed to find my way of moving forward in a way that feels enjoyable to me. That's still the key to it all, really—just enjoying what you do.

**Your desire to create things shouldn't disappear just because that particular band came to an end.**

That's very true. I've sort of been hiding away while working with all these wonderful bands over the last 20 years with the label, and maybe missing out on my own creative ideas to a degree. But, I've managed to put my energy into running the label without feeling the creative loss too greatly. Doing a record label and working with musicians is also very much a creative pursuit. It wasn't until I went on tour with Mercury Rev about a year ago—something I hadn't done in nearly two decades—that I realized how much I missed it. I thoroughly enjoyed every second of it, which I was not expecting to.

That was the catalyst I needed. I finally said to myself, "You know what? You need to get back to making music, Simon. You *can* do this." I didn't care about it being a band or a record with a definitive release date. It was only important that I was making music just for the fun of it, just like I did when I was 15 years old or whatever. That's what I needed to return to.

Whatever the end product was, or even if there was no end product, I didn't care. I don't care. Once I'd figured that out, how everyone perceived it was really not my concern. Once I processed all of those thoughts—weeded out all the relevant ones and thrown away all the ones I didn't need—I could move forward. That's how the Lost Horizons thing began to make sense to me. From then on it was just a piece of cake putting the whole thing together, because it was just about pleasure.

**Given that the narrative around the music industry these days is always so dire—*The industry is dead! No one buys music! No one cares about albums!—what is it about running a label that gives you pleasure? Does it stem from the idea that you are enabling this music to find a home out in the world?**

Well, at the purest level there is an amount of ego about it. There is a selfishness about it to a degree. You know, "I think I've got great taste and I want to share it with the world!" It's not really about me, though. It sort of feels like it's a mission. It may sound stupid, but you know when you hear something, generally very late at night, and you very quickly become obsessed about it? That feeling? That's how I've become with music as a fan. That's how I feel about releasing records. I look at it as a fan thing. I don't look at it as a business thing. I just love these things and I want to share them.

I mean, it *is* a business. Of course it is. But as soon as I start thinking, "Oh, this could do well," or "This could be a hit," it's no good.To be honest, I don't know what sells, or what people are going to like or not like and I couldn't care less what other people think. I only know when I hear music how it affects me on an emotional or spiritual or physical level, and if all three of those are happening for me, then I'm going to do everything I can to work with that band. I understand that the industry has changed over the years, and I get why people find it quite a grim existence, because obviously from a keeping-a-business-running perspective, you need to sell records.

These days not very much sells because no one really buys anything, so as far as a business goes, it's very difficult to justify signing new bands because the whole model has been completely turned on its head. There is really no model anymore for bands, but I don't think it's a negative thing. Instead, I think, "Well, that's just the way it is." There's no point in moaning about it. Bands have to be more realistic these days. You can't walk in just thinking, "Well, they're going to give me a bunch of money and I'm going to become famous." Not that you should ever have thought that, but even more so today. That is just a fallacy.

It doesn't work like that. You have to go into this knowing that you're probably not going to sell any records at all, and that's how I approach it. I say to all the bands, "Listen, signing to Bella Union is not some gateway to a better life." Because usually I'm just putting a record out, and I'll work as hard as I can in letting people know about it, but they have to accept the possibility—and it's quite a high possibility—that in a year's time they'll still be totally unknown and they'll have sold 12 records. If they're happy to proceed on that basis and we can understand each other, then it's going to be a pleasurable experience. But if they're going to come back to me in a year's time and go, "Well, how come I'm not selling loads of records?" It's probably best we don't work together, because I don't know what the answer is either. I'm just trying to be realistic but also have fun with it and not take it too much to heart if a record doesn't take off. Generally it's no one's fault that a record doesn't take off. It's just because there's too much shit out there.

People aren't paying as much attention to music as they used to, and there are fewer and fewer avenues for people to discover stuff. Also, people are lazy. People just prefer to sit on the sofa and watch Netflix. That's just a fact. I wish it wasn't so. I wish people went out to shows more. I wish people went to record shops more, but they don't. What am I going to do? I'm not going to cry about it. It will change again in time and we'll be moaning about something else. That's how I look at it. I don't take it too seriously. Well, I take it seriously, but I try not to get too down about it if it doesn't go very well, and not to get too excited about it if it does.

**You've had some crazy ups and downs over the course of your career and I know you've spoken about this before, the experience of losing everything at certain points and starting again essentially from scratch. How have those experiences affected the way you approach making things? How does one pick themselves up and keep creating when the universe seems to be working against them?**

The whole of my life has been dotted with periods of great loss, and I think that the first time something happens, whether it's as a kid when your pet dies or as a young adult when your parent dies, it changes you. We are programmed to deal with loss more effectively than I think we give ourselves credit for. The time I noticed it most was when I lost my Dad. I was in my 20s and he died just before he was 60. He was a musician, too.

When you experience loss at a young age, it helps you with the stuff that comes later. At some point most of us have to go through a hard time with relationships that don't work out or businesses that go bust. Death and destruction will follow us around for the majority of our life, but that can also be a motivating force. I think because I lost things quite early—and I had great parents—I haven't ever found it to be too debilitating of an issue. I try and find the positive in there somewhere. Even if the energy or the darkness is quite all-consuming at some point, I always try and turn that into a positive.

With the Cocteau Twins, it was as if the band's entire existence was about dealing with loss. At a certain point we left 4AD, our original label, and that ultimately was wrong. We went with a major label and that was a terrible mistake. Liz and Robin lost their relationship and then the band broke up. In a very short space of time we were dealing with a *lot* of things going horribly wrong. Robin had a massive drug problem. The band's relationships, both with its labels and with each other, became hard to make any sense of. Then on top of that, we lost our beautiful studio, which we'd spent every penny that we'd ever earned on. All of this gear we'd bought—amplifiers, guitars, pianos, a fully equipped studio with the most amazing stuff—gone. Everything was taken away and we were declared bankrupt.

Having been earning a decent amount of money during the heyday of the band, to suddenly have nothing—literally nothing—was shocking. All that money was either sniffed up noses or spent on equipment, and eventually we were left with zero. As bad as it was to go, over the course of a couple of days, from having all of this gear to suddenly having to go back to making things on a little 4-track recorder…to be honest, there was actually something super liberating about it.

It was like when you got your first guitar pedal, you know? God, it's exciting. I can make these amazing sounds with this one guitar pedal? All of a sudden it was like that all over again. You had to start at the bottom, but you realized very swiftly that all the gear in the world, all the TVs in the world, all the cars in the world, all the property in the world, all the stuff in the world…it didn't matter. As long as you have good ideas, you don't fucking need anything. Stuff is just stuff. I was 40 years old when we lost the studio. That was the age I was when I lost all the stuff I'd spent my 20's and 30's accumulating. I also lost my marriage. Then, my house. That's quite a lot of stuff to lose in a very short amount of time.

But somehow I never felt crippled by it. I never went down the road of just giving up and becoming a drug addict, which could have been a possibility. Dealing with that stuff, or thinking now about how I dealt with it, seems significant when I look back on it. Same goes with the record label. I've basically lost that more times than I could tell you. We've had two massive business catastrophes during the label's history, and, had I not already dealt with loss in my life in the way that I did, I would have just crumbled and thought, "Well, I can't continue this." When our distributor went bust, we lost hundreds of thousands of pounds. That kind of money in my little business world is very, very significant. It's enough to end you, because a small record label is operating on very small margins. So that happened. Then a few months later our licensing partner went bust and, again, I lost a shitload of money.

Now, I could have easily just said, "Okay, that's it. I cannot keep recovering from these disasters." But I didn't. Instead, I somehow felt stronger as a result of it all. It's almost like the more you knock me down, the more I'm just going to go out and carry on with it. I'm just going to go out and do it anyway. I've been lucky to have some very cool people around me who have been supportive and stupid enough to want to carry along with me for the ride. I think it's been worth it. I think I've done a good job with the label. I still love music. I still love musicians. I still feel excited about making things and helping other people make things. Over the course of 20 years it could have easily just petered out into nothing. I could have just given up at the first sign of trouble. But I didn't…and here we are.

**Simon Raymonde recommends:**

*Here are "5 tracks I played on that aren't the most obvious ones"*

Billy Mackenzie "At The Edge Of The World" from the LP *Beyond the Sun* (1997)

Emerging from the theme of "loss," it seems appropriate to start this list with being asked to produce an album by a dead hero of mine. This was in 1997, shortly after the demise of my own band (another ending of sorts). One of my favorite bands of all time were The Associates, and I hero-worshipped singer Billy Mackenzie for years—not only because he asked me (aged 18) to walk his whippets on several occasions… Long story! After he tragically died, Nude Records approached me to see if I'd be interested in producing 6 tracks that Billy had begun before he passed away. Impossible a task as it seemed, it was a huge honor to be involved, and I threw myself into it full force. (The album was just reissued on One Little Indian.) While much of the album is stripped-back and stark—as it felt it needed to be—for one song I did add some gentle wah-wah guitar and a fluid bass line. It was a massive privilege to be a small part of it. I like to think Billy was smiling at what we produced.

Pyramids with Nadja - "Into the Silent Waves" released on Hydra Head Records (2009)

I played bass on a couple of tracks on this record, and while it seems like a pretty obscure release, I love the extremity of it. The noise elements are more widescreen than just playing with volume.

James Yorkston & The Athletes "I Spy Dogs" From the LP *Moving Up Country* on Domino Records (2002)

I had superb fun producing the debut LP of James Yorkston for Domino, in an old hop kiln in the English countryside. On this track we wanted some pedal steel/lap steel vibes and I didn't know anyone then who played it (and there wasn't any budget anyway), so I played it instead! Very proud of the overall sound of this LP, too.

Anthony Reynolds and Vashti Bunyan - "Just So You Know" from *Bees Dream of Flowers and Your Summer's Meadow Breath* on Hungry Hill Records (2008)

Originally recorded in 2003/4, prior to her signing with Fat Cat, I was delighted to be involved in the return to music-making for Vashti Bunyan. We worked together on demos for what was to become *Lookaftering*, and some of the recordings I have from those sessions are really fantastic. I brought in Fiona Brice to those sessions, a brilliant string player and arranger I had worked with several times before, and while I sadly wasn't involved with the next stage of Vashti's career, I was thrilled she kept working with Fiona and still does to this day! This was a lovely track she and Anthony did together, and I played some piano for it.

Our Broken Garden - *Golden Sea* (2010)

There's not even one average song on this LP—it oozes class and sensuality throughout *and* has brilliant videos to accompany tracks, such as "Garden Grow," which is like watching an episode of *The Muppet Show* if it was directed by Tim Burton. Our Broken Garden are Danish and should be as heralded as so many lesser Scandinavian bands seem to be.

*And here are 5 lost treasures on Bella Union:*

**Pearly Gate Music - *Pearly Gate Music* (2010)**

Baby brother of J Tillman aka Father John Misty. Released a full two years before FJM's debut LP *Fear Fun* came out, I think everything about this record is brilliant—including the band name. It never really achieved any kind of attention at all, but the handful of us that know it *really* love it. Zach Tillman has talent to burn.

**Arc Iris - *Moon Saloon* (2016)**

Jocie Adams left The Low Anthem to form Arc Iris, and this second LP is one of my all-time favorites. I'm a little mystified as to why I appear to be a lone voice of obsessive love. I cannot compare them to anything, which might explain why they didn't fit into any convenient "box." Masterfully mixed by Dave Wrench (Caribou, FKA twigs etc), this is a wild untamed hybrid of Mingus, Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell, and Grizzly Bear.

**The Acorn - *Glory Hope Mountain* (2008)**

Who knows what would have become of this LP had its release not coincided with the Fleet Foxes debut LP. That record ended up selling a million records here in Europe and everything we released on either side of it seemed to sadly disappear without trace. Thing is, this Acorn album is 100% the equal of the FF debut. Not even kidding.

**BC Camplight - *How To Die In The North* (2015)**

After a few personal disasters and label mishaps, hearing the early mixes of this gave me the feeling that it could genuinely be the album of the year, and a real upturn in fortune for Philadelphia-native Brian Christinzio. His pedigree (playing with Sharon Van Etten on *Epic* and with The War on Drugs) was great, but the LP was simply magnificent. What happened? On the eve of release here, he got deported and was banned from Europe for a year. Thankfully he is back in 2018 with all his problems behind him and an equally startling new LP!

**Our Broken Garden - *Golden Sea* (2010)** See above.

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Vocation
Musician, Producer, Label Owner





