

On emotional immediacy



Singer Matt Korvette (Pissed Jeans) on pairing sentiment and sound, being your own best critic, and writing as truthfully as possible about the moment you inhabit.

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As told to Niina Pollari, 3265 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration, Money.

What did you grow up listening to?

I've always been a lover of music, since I was a little guy. [It was] probably a typical progression for guys in America with a similar cultural background and age range: from Guns 'N Roses to Nirvana to Green Day.

I was quick to dig deeper as a preteen. It was hard to do that too, to figure out where to go. I didn't have an older sibling. I did find punk when I was 14 or 15, local scene stuff. From there it was just like, "This is my spot." I love every bit of it. I love the immediacy, and the fact that anyone can do it, and that you can meet the people doing it. It just was so different.

Do you remember the first time that you thought that you might be a musician, rather than just a listener of music?

I was probably 13. I just had a buddy who had a guitar, and I got a bass, and we just tried to write songs. It must've felt impossible at that point. It was really once I was maybe 14 or 15, when I saw other kids a little older than me actually being in bands, that it clicked as a possibility.

I needed to try one way or another, even without the knowledge of how to do it. I just really wanted to try it, to make music, because it was my favorite thing.

I ask because, with some arts, I don't feel like I can engage as "just" a fan. I was wondering if you always had that feeling about music.

Yeah, I guess [in music] it feels more attainable to let your personality coast you into being the thing, rather than [for] a sculptor or a writer where maybe you have to really put in the work and learn the craft. Music has a door open more for hucksters, in a good way. Someone can just show up, and because they want it bad enough, they can just become it.

People are connecting with you, hopefully on an emotional or personality level, but that doesn't mean you have to know how to play scales or whatever, right? I mean, maybe you need to find someone else who does, but you can work together, which is nice.

I guess some people like dazzling craft by itself. There's some people who love that in every medium, but that's not what I gravitate towards: feats of strength or dexterity.

You have in the past talked, perhaps in a tongue-in-cheek way, about music being like a hobby for you. Has this perception been freeing in any way?

Hobby feels like maybe not a perfect word for it, but it shows that here's a thing I really love, but I'm not dependent upon it to keep the electricity on. That is such a nice feeling, to have a thing outside the realm of, "I need to do this to survive."

It's just great to have a thing you're passionate about. I am lucky that we have people that listen to us. It's clearly not just for me. I'm purposely sharing this stuff with the world so that people can react to it. The best part is knowing we can just choose what to do, and hopefully that is its own reward.

You guys don't put out albums all that often. How do you know it's time to put something out?

Once we have enough stuff, and once it feels like there's a coherence to it. We'd love to put out a record every six months if we were that hardworking, but we're not.

You want to still sound like yourself, but you don't want to copy yourself. It's like that finding that sweet spot: it's clearly recognizable as us, but it's not a rehashing of exactly what we did before. It can just take a while to get enough quality material. We're pretty strong critics of ourselves. We'll work on a thing and sometimes it's just not good enough, and that's okay. We can just forget about it and move on to the next thing.

Maybe even if you're attached to something, it eventually doesn't serve the larger work. And so you've got to be the critic. You've got to let that one go.

I feel like anything that I've put out there, for the most part I'm pleased with on some level still. Certain things you can tell: I [hadn't] experienced the world enough yet. Or maybe it was a little bit of a hack-y idea that felt really novel to me at the time.

But generally I just try to keep track of all my ideas. 90% of them are terrible, but it takes a day or a week or so to realize that. I'm pretty ruthless with myself, but I try to keep it all, and then if something sticks, it feels like, "Okay, we might have something to work with here." It's definitely good to not be afraid to remove things, or cut away a safety net or something. [As a writer, yourself,] I'm sure you have things you could do that would be a crowd pleaser on some level, but you'd be dying inside if you did it.

Yeah, those rhetorical tricks. I refer to it as cuteness, and I try to not do it anymore.

Yeah, I've been in that position. Maybe you dabble a little bit with cute, and then everyone likes it and then you feel even worse. You're like, "Oh."

The worst.

Or people pay attention to that more than what you think is the real, good meat that you're serving.

It makes you want to pull a Lou Reed, and put out some deeply unapproachable shit like *Metal Machine Music*.

You also don't want to just be reacting against what you think is cute either. You don't want to fall into that trap.

You shouldn't be thinking for the audience.

It's tricky because you are writing for an audience. I keep them in mind, but I have to approve of [the work] myself, too. It has to feel good. If I have to choose between an audience loving it, or me loving it, I will go with me every time. It's just such a good feeling to feel like you nailed it.

How does songwriting work for you?

It's about the idea or the sentiment at first. Those are what I try to collect. Maybe it's a title that feels like it's going to be something. When we're working on music, I try to figure out what feels like it goes well, or will be a good pairing as far as sentiment and sound.

It's a really fun exercise, because sometimes I have a great idea that just doesn't have a musical home. Something that this feels abstract or weird, and then you hear the music and I'm like, "Oh. No, this has to be this." That's one of the most satisfying parts of writing songs, I think—matching the words to the music.

What's your day-to-day engagement like with music? On the days that you're not with the band, do you work on music by yourself?

I'm always coming up with ideas and stockpiling them and culling them and weeding out and deleting them. But we work furiously once there's a light at the end of the tunnel. As I'm sure you know, once you've got half, the other half comes quicker. Whereas when you're just starting, it feels like, "Where do I even begin," sometimes? It takes a while to get that first half. And then once we have that light, we just work extra hard. We really try to pull things together.

A lot of the recent songs cover what I refer to as grownup bullshit: the debt cycle, and choosing where to live, and divorce. Those aren't youthful preoccupations necessarily.

No, not at all.

I'd love to hear more about the relationship between getting older and the topics that you take on.

I'm always trying to write about things that I feel strongly about in that moment—strong in the sense of concern or fear or resentment or anger. If something's sending me warning signs in a way that I feel off about it, or frustrated, or ashamed, it's always going to be about where I'm at age-wise.

I'm in many ways following a traditional American life of college, job, kid, getting older. I can't help but write about those experiences as they come. Before, I wrote a bunch about being in a workplace in an office because that was really just jarring and a terrible feeling. But I've been working from home for nine years now or something, so that's not really affecting me much. It's just other stuff.

I want to write to my peers and in a sincere way, and hopefully things that everyone else isn't talking about, even though I think they should. That's the most fun part. I love to be a little shocking, but in the non-cheapest way possible. I want to just say something that's so real that it shocks rather than so offensive that it shocks.

A lot of stuff is weirdly taboo, and I am interested in discussing that just it makes me uncomfortable, too. If you're talking about divorce, or going bald, or criticizing someone's parenting—these are things you just cannot talk about, and to me that's more exciting than anything else. It is fun to be annoying or provocative, but I want to do it in a way that feels earned rather than just cheap.

I really like that. To be provocative from the perspective of an adult with an adult's lived experience is more challenging because you know more.

Yeah, it's fun. It's almost like you feel better about it when you're done writing. It's not a dirty secret anymore or a shame that you're harboring. Even just by calling it by its name, it's less powerful is how it feels to me sometimes.

If I feel bad about going bald and I sing about it, then it's like this no longer has any power. Who cares? It became funny. It's not something that can control you in the same way.

Yeah, I was going to say you control the story. Money is one of those things that used to be more taboo, and now a lot more people are talking about it or taking it on as a topic.

Do you think that's a younger generational thing, or is it your peers, too? Because I feel like I've noticed the youth, people in their 20s or whatever, are keenly attuned to talking about to demanding money in a way that my generation of punks never would.

Because it used to be called selling out before.

I guess it's like we don't exist where selling out can exist. Now, there's punk bands who do a Taco Bell commercial and everyone's like, "Oh, that's really good."

I can see it both ways. People should be paid for their art or whatever, but I love just doing it for the sake of doing it, writing stuff because you need to do it, not because you feel entitled to the pay that should be associated with it.

It used to be a lot easier to get paid in general. Outside of art, it was the easy way, to go ahead and achieve your middle class existence. It was punk to not be paid money.

Yeah, the jobs paid you more somehow, right? It wasn't so predatorial. There was some luxury in having a house [where you could say] "Oh, we all pay \$175 a month in rent." That does not exist anymore, so I wouldn't hold anyone to that same 1996 standard. But it's also cool when people do hold themselves to that, who are just like would rather die than take corporate money for a thing. You don't have to, in my book, but that's cool if you do.

I would be too preoccupied with precariousness. I have always preferred to have a job that is not my identity.

No, totally. Because then you have the freedom to create your own identity without having to sweat it so hard, right? The moment you're writing for the purpose of getting in *The New Yorker* or something, it's probably terrible compared to what you do elsewhere.

Do you get burned out? Creatively or in any other way?

Sometimes. But I guess I don't work frequently enough. I mean, playing shows and stuff can be a little tiring, and I say that as someone who doesn't play a lot of shows. I don't know how people in my peer group go on the road for three months. It sounds truly like psychological, physical torture to be eating rest stop food every day and never having any privacy. You're always just with people, but you're bored most of the time. Props to the people who have the ability to withstand that. Because if I'm out longer than four or five days, it's just like, "Oh, I miss the comforts of home."

In your day-to-day, what is a restorative or recharging ritual for you?

I play a ton of tennis, actually. That's the best thing because your brain isn't thinking about anything for an hour. You're just truly not thinking about anything besides hitting a ball. Also you get better at it just by virtue of doing it. Which is true about everything, but it's nice to witness improvement and just have that time away from being creative.

You send out a regular newsletter of record reviews. What is the role of criticism in your own art?

I love turning people on to stuff that they didn't know about. That's just the best feeling to me. I feel like I'm finally providing use to the world when I'm giving good recommendations to people who are open for them. That's always fun.

I also love trying to make a point about something. If I find something unappealing, I love to try to explain that. It's what I like to read from other people. I like people who have their own opinions and are not afraid to

share them, even if I disagree. I try to find a good balance just wanting to be readable and hopefully relatable and fun. I just love writing.

People always ask me about this, and I feel like you probably get comments about it as well. What is the role of humor in your work?

I feel like maybe we have a similar mindset where it's a nice way to put [humor] throughout heavier stuff. Not in a way of lessening the blow, but just adding that contrast can make it more vivid if you're discussing something that is dead serious.

Because life is full of stupid funniness too, right? It's useful to throw something in that might be unexpected or funny.

Even when something is devastating or infuriating, it can also have an absurdity about it.

Also, I'm always joking around with my friends. It's like how we talk to each other, and so that's going to be my most natural way of communicating in art, too.

Yeah. You might have a persona in your art. I feel like all of us do in some capacity. But it can't be totally divorced from who you are, right?

Yeah. It's more fun to bring out the strength of who I am. I feel like with your work, every sentence is very easy to read. It's not incredible words that we have to go to the dictionary to feel what's being said, or metaphors that don't make any sense unless you know a third fact about a secret thing. You can just pick up your book and know what you're trying to convey, and that's really how I try to write, too. Simplistically as far as the words used, and then hopefully in a fresh combination.

I definitely get the sense of immediacy from your work. It doesn't place me at a distance as the listener. Once I hear the lyrics, I can chuckle where it's appropriate.

Have you ever tried to write more abstractly?

Yeah, but it doesn't interest me.

It feels terrible, right? It just feels like the phoniest thing. I almost don't like people who write like that. Then just from my own experience, I'm like, *This feels so fake*, but that's just me. I'm sure for some people it's their truth.

I'm not interested in creating distance.

I feel very similarly. Even if the situations we're talking about are very specific to us, I'd want it to be relatable, because probably the emotions underneath them are pretty universal.

I think specificity creates universality. It actually brings the audience closer.

Oh, totally. I don't know how you approach the fact that we're all on our phones and on social media and stuff. It's almost too typical to write about, but it feels so real, so I want to acknowledge what life is really like for us now. We're not waiting by the telephone for our friend to call. That's what you would do in 1982.

Nowadays, it's totally different. I want to explain that without being lame about it. It's not fun to type out the word Instagram in anything, and that word has never been in a lyric of mine. But it's so much a part of our lives that it feels like it should be. How do you approach that? Wanting to be cool and write good stuff, but also wanting to acknowledge the world we live in?

I think people always say you shouldn't date yourself, or you should make sure that your material transcends time. But these things have a place in our art, and I think it's a part of the absurdity you were talking about earlier.

I wonder how history will treat us in this moment. I can think about Iggy Pop writing about TV Eye, and at the time maybe it was just as lame as writing about Instagram now. Where it's like, "Yeah, we are on TV. We watch TV, big deal. We know this." But now you hear it and you're like, "Oh, man, that's so cool the way he discussed that thing in 1974."

I'm wondering what the future will think about this era, and so I want to try to replicate that as truthfully as possible, and then hope it seems cool. You know what I mean?

Yeah. We'll have some unfathomable technologies in the future and people will be like, "This is how they used to reckon with the new frontier of surveillance."

I'm sure our work will be quaint compared to what happens 40 years from now when everyone's micro-chipped and minority reporting through the air and stuff, and we're just here talking about looking at a device still.

Matt Korvette Recommends:

Five Songs Required Listening Right Now

God's Gift - "Today I Never Thought Of You At All"

Shona Laing - "Soviet Snow (Murray & Justin 12" Popstand Remix)"

Chris Korda - "Not My Problem I'll Be Dead"

The Primitives - "Really Stupid"

Anne Cessna & Essendon Airport - "Talking To Cleopatra"

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