On staying curious



Songwriter and producer Stephen Steinbrink discusses creative crushes, learning to trust others, and the importance of embracing the unknown.

October 27, 2023 -

As told to Sammy Maine, 3052 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Collaboration, Creative anxiety, Process, Inspiration.

Growing up in Phoenix, what did your curiosity look like then?

I was always an inward-facing child. My parents really encouraged all of my weird interests, which was mostly drawing comics and watching weird movies. Every couple of years I would develop some obsession. There really weren't a whole lot of opportunities back then, so it was pretty self-directed. My mom is also an artist, and so she would always encourage us to explore and be curious. All of my siblings are either painters, singers, or writers. By the time I was a teenager and met people that were interested in the same things as me, I just took off because then we could be obsessive together.

At that time Phoenix was kind of a desolate, weird zone, especially in the downtown area, and you could get a gallery space for around $300 a month. There were massive 2,000-square-foot gallery spaces in certain areas that were just completely abandoned. Nobody went down there. So, on this one avenue in Phoenix, between the years of 2000 and 2012, there was an explosion of all-ages spaces. They weren't really marketed as such, but there were lots of art galleries, lots of weird underground art and music venues. It started to become really easy to book shows; you could just find someone's email and organize a show with three of your friends' bands and have a weird event in downtown Phoenix as loud as you wanted or as quiet as you wanted. That's the moment where I became more curious as a vocation.

You've been writing and recording and producing for over a decade now. In what ways have you strived to nourish your creativity over the years to keep making art?

Partially it is a compulsive thing, but also, I've never really considered it that way. It's just so fun, for the most part, that it's hard to resist. I mostly make music alone, and the writing aspect is always very much a private thing. It's definitely a space where I can process things and move from one phase of life to the next. In the last few years it's been a vehicle to get to know people better too, like my friendship with Taylor Vick (Boy Scouts). With my last album, it was definitely like that. There are people I meet who are really interesting and I end up developing these creative crushes on them and want to see how their mind works in different collaborative contexts. It feels irresistible to me.

You have collaborated with a lot of people, especially on your new album *Disappearing Coin*, but you've also produced for other artists and toured with other artists. What are the most helpful things you've learned from working with others when it comes to your own art making?

I've developed all these little rules for best practices for myself. The first five or six albums I made were solo projects, and I usually don't really show much of the works in progress to people, even now, unless I really trust them. For so many years it was just me working by myself and playing everything and I developed this claustrophobic, habitual gravity towards certain musical ideas. When I started collaborating with more people,

maybe about 10 years ago, we would get into the studio and I would encourage them to play a part. Obviously, it would be different than anything I could've come up with, but it would bother me. I would feel the force of my own conditioning pressuring me to say something and it stemmed from fear of letting go of control. I still experience that, too. If I'm in the studio with someone and I want them to play a melodic part or a bass part, and it's not exactly how I am hearing it in my head, it can momentarily feel kind of upsetting.

But I think now, I've had so many good experiences, having other musicians really just totally change my mind and take songs and parts to a place that I couldn't even have imagined, for the better. I've had that happen enough that when I feel that impulse to speak up about not liking a part, I just be quiet and wait for my conditioned mind to catch up to what they're doing. It's made music, or at least recording, and playing live, so much more enjoyable and fulfilling. What are my other best practices? Just keeping my mouth shut and learning to trust people more.

We have so much to learn from others. And even though songwriting is so personal, and all art making is really, there is this sense of self that you have to let go in order to create your best work.

Totally, and it can just be so miraculous too, when you train yourself to be open to it. My current ensemble that I'm going on tour with soon, I really try to meditate on that before we rehearse or cultivate that attitude with them. So much cool stuff happens from the rehearsals. And even the shows that we play, a mistake can turn into a permanent part of the arrangement, and it's fun.

Some people see mistakes as a failure and then failure is this huge deal to them. What is your relationship with failure or mistakes in general?

It's complicated. In a musical context, I think that mistakes can be really cool openings into just snapping yourself out of what is expected and what comes naturally, and that can be really freeing. I don't like making mistakes in other contexts in my life, but artistic mistakes, they're awesome. I love them. It's like accidentally playing a joke on yourself. Mistakes can be really hilarious.

Also, when I was recording the Boy Scouts album *Wayfinder,* Taylor has such a beautiful voice and has the ability to sing very perfectly but when we were recording a lot of the vocals, often my favorite takes would be the ones that were just slightly weird. I feel like that's where the real magic lies. With singing, especially, too. You listen to all of your favorite singers, their voices are always kind of weird. It's always something strange. Those weird imperfections are where all of the emotion lies. Like Lou Reed, oh man, my favorite voice. Just so beautiful, so distinctive and perfect. And especially on his later records when he was sick. Those are some of my favorites. But the vocal stuff, applying that, I tried to apply that to that lesson I learned from Taylor's record into my new record, too.

Spirituality is a huge part of your life and has been for a while. In what ways, if at all, does it inform your artistic process?

I became interested in meditation and Buddhism, I think how a lot of people do, just out of a desperate need to feel some sort of relief or feel different in some way. It wasn't that I was always in intense states of crisis necessarily, but it was more just this banal desperation; a kind of really boring feeling of the most boring anxiety, mundane anxiousness. It just felt untenable. There's the trope of people beginning to explore a creative practice, and they experience a profound moment of awakening that changes their life. It definitely wasn't that for me, it was a slow, very subtle shift that took a lot of work and still takes a lot of work. The concept that I like to explore when thinking about this is embracing the unknown and how the world can open up; you can feel more liberated out of this place of total submission to not being super confident or knowledgeable, or just a submission to having no control. But that's hard. It's still hard for me.

Do you think that that informs the way you make art?

I think the most obvious way is not trying to make things so perfect and caring more about feelings and performance. I think about when I was making *Arranged Waves* or *Anagrams*, it really was the complete opposite of

that. It was a total commitment to some idea of perfection, which I think was a cool idea to explore. But the actual process of making those albums wasn't very fun. It was painful and all-encompassing. When making *Disappearing Coin*, it just kind of happened. I thought about it a lot, but in the same way I would think about a friend or something that I love doing instead of something I was trying to bend to my aesthetic or creative will. I definitely think that's a result of that.

When do you know it's time to walk away from a project you're working on?

I made an album in between the years of 2016 and 2018. I don't know if I've fully abandoned it, but it was in the early stages of being released and I was like, "No, you can't. You can't come out." It's funny because it's pretty ambitious and really extremely high fidelity, and the arrangements are pretty robust but for some reason it's been really hard to want to release it.

Do you know what happened in the moment when you decided not to release it?

It's funny because I just listened to it again two weeks ago and I was like, "This ain't bad. This is fine." I think it was more about the way that I made it. I recorded it at the Unknown in Anacortes and when I started, I was trying to shortcut my way into not being so obsessive about mixes; to shortcut my way into not being so precious about whether the performance was perfect or if it was the right arrangement choice or if I sang the best vocal takes. So my method was to go to Anacortes and record for two weeks without any plan, and then not get any rough mixes back from the engineer.

For the first year, it was like that; I wasn't listening to any of the mixes unless I was at the studio and then I would keep coming back for sessions. Eventually I got a little too greedy and anxious for rough mixes and then I just slipped back into my old habits. Then It was near the end of the project, I was effectively listening, tweaking little things and flying back to Washington to redo one vocal take on a weekend. It was just so absurd. It took so many years to finish that by the time it was completed, I felt like there were all these different versions of Stephen singing songs. I didn't even really know who or what they were about because they were about different things and different situations depending on when or where I sang it. It was a weird long-distance project. I felt really disconnected from it when it was in the early stages of being released. I knew I would feel too uncomfortable promoting this record that I don't even know what it's about.

When I listen to it now, it's a weird collection of weird narrative pieces about all these different people. I stopped seeing it less of a personal introspective group of songs about my experience and more was listening to it from a slight remove where I was like, "Okay, this is about a bunch of different people." And when I think about it that way, the album becomes less icky to me and more interesting.

If we liken it to books, it could be like a short stories collection rather than a novel.

Totally. This year I've been reading all of Denis Johnson's books. They're too bonkers to not have actually happened to him or happened to people that he knew. And I mean, he talks about that in interviews too. It's like, "This story is like 65% me." With the exception of a few songwriters, I think that mostly when someone's listening to a song, it can be assumed that it's coming from an autobiographical place but not all of my songs are, I'm realizing. They're not all super autobiographical.

I know you're a huge reader and now you do stained glass as part of your day job, do you feel it's important to explore other types of artwork to enhance your main art? Or do you even categorize them in that way?

I guess I see it all as the same thing, maybe a little bit. Obviously I've spent more time cultivating songwriting and production, but I love to draw and my partner is a comic artist and is pretty involved in that world. It's definitely been interesting, with that experience, and then also at the art center and working with artists every day and with their projects and installations and troubleshooting with them, it doesn't really feel all that different, honestly. Songwriting is my main thing, but it all informs the other.

Do you view your songwriting as a business? Or do you feel conflicted about that?

I'm so inept at that side of things. I'm so inept with any of the commodification of what it is. It's not that I'm opposed to it. It hasn't ever come naturally to me. I really feel super confident in a recording studio, or when I'm playing or when I'm collaborating with people in a studio setting, I feel pretty powerful. I think that's mostly my discomfort with playing live, too, is essentially that it's like presenting and people have paid for a ticket to come see you. It's like you're offering a weird commodity/service. There's a lot to explore there, but no, I don't think of songwriting in that way. I think that if I did, there would be a sharp decline in the quality of my writing.

I think it just adds such a pressure to it. Of course we have to make money to live, but there's definitely a line when an artist just becomes a product and I wonder if they are fulfilled in their creativity.

Totally. I definitely think it's possible, though. I know some people who really have fun with that aspect and are able to make it a fun, interesting element of their practice too. And I respect that. I think that for a lot of years I felt like there was something wrong with my attitude because I knew that it was possible; I had concrete evidence that it was possible. I don't think there's anything I can do to really drastically change my situation at this point, in terms of comfort with how I feel about that stuff. So I'm just trying to accept it more.

You mentioned "different Stephens" earlier and I wonder if there was anything you wish you could tell past Stephen when you began making art?

I would probably tell him to go a little slower and to wait a little bit, or just try to cultivate a sense of comfort by hanging tight for a moment or waiting to release something. I definitely felt, back in the day, like I had to sprint to release as much music as I possibly could or write all the time. But also, I think I did okay, too.

Stephen Steinbrink Recommends:

***Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home*:** I remember watching Jacques Pepin on PBS when I was a kid and being mesmerized by this weird gruff but gentle man with a thick accent cooking with the finesse of an improvisational dancer. Rewatching his programs as an adult who loves to cook, I became totally obsessed with the egalitarian generosity he expressed through his craft, and the wabi sabi technique that only a true master of an art form can muster. He really believes anyone can cook, and it's true. Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home is my favorite of all his programs because it's so hilarious and rough hewn, two old friends who just happen to be icons riffing on classic dishes and arguing with each other about whether or not to use black or white pepper.

Sabine Teyssonneyre: I spent several months France in the fall of 2021 getting to know Sabine Teyssonneyre, a comics artist and researcher based in Angoulême who's work is not easily describable—she manipulates the comic-strip form to create highly conceptual, abstract worlds to explore the contemporary surveillance state, magic, and performance art, fusing apocalypse and terror into a unique and beautiful poetry ("a dangerous honey," as she puts in in her writing in du9). I am enchanted with artists who coax established artistic traditions into new exciting forms and uses.

Denis Johnson: This winter I tore into Denis Johnson's bibliography in chronological order, beginning with *Jesus' Son* and ending a few months later with *Largesse of the Sea Maiden*. His stories exemplified an idea that was important to me while finishing *Disappearing Coin*—the ability to feel an emotional state without being it—exploring darkness and emotional desolation without needing to embody it fully. His sentences float above his characters, tracing the weird woven web of relationship and probability through a wormhole of prose that spits you out believing in beauty more than you did before you started. The way he wrangles desperation and absurdity, each emotion tempering the other into a lyrical reality that reflects true experience on Earth in a way I hadn't experienced in a book before.

***Pelican Dreams*:** Living in the Bay, it's hard not to fall in love with the large dinosaurs soaring over the water: the magnificent Brown Pelican. I was stunned to learn about these beautiful creatures in the 2014 documentary *Pelican Dreams* by Judy Irving, where she follows an injured brown pelican rescued on the Golden Gate Bridge to a new life in a rehabilitation center for large birds. I indeed had visions of pelicans for weeks after watching.

UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record: Leslie Kean's index of documented UAP sightings is a fascinating unfurling of possible hidden realities or entertaining science fiction, depending on one's level of agnosticism on the topic of unidentified flying objects.

Name

Stephen Steinbrink

Vocation

songwriter, stained glass conservator, designer, meditator, producer