

Spencer Tweedy on doing your own thing



February 16, 2017 - Spencer Tweedy is a musician from Chicago. He is a college student studying philosophy and co-president of the school's band booking committee. His first solo EP came out this year. He has also drummed on records by Mavis Staples, Pops Staples, and Wilco.

As told to Hannah Street Elliott, 1898 words.

Tags: Music, Technology, Identity.

You've been expanding outside of drumming for a while, posting songs on Bandcamp in the past few years and now releasing your first EP. With Tweedy and your other drumming gigs going so well, what was the urge to expand beyond being a drummer?

I think the biggest thing is that I don't even like drumming as much as I like songs. When I play drums, the part I enjoy most is playing the song. I don't know if it would be fair to call that a utilitarian attitude about drumming, but I'm just really excited by making whole songs.

I first started recording stuff on my own when I was a sophomore in high school. I've always loved working by myself. I was getting into these records by people who made entire bands by themselves, like Paul McCartney on *RAM*, Tame Impala, etc. The idea that I could do something entirely my own—and would be an outlet for drumming—was really fun. I like to write songs that would be fun for me to drum on, but at the same time I think drumming ought to serve the song. It's not so great on its own.

Do you see yourself performing this solo stuff live? Is the ultimate goal to be the frontman of your own band?

It's scary to imagine, but yeah. I'd like to start playing some of this stuff live. School is a good place to try that out. When I was little, I imagined that it could be something like my dad's band, Wilco, or it could be like any full, real band. These days I'm more attracted to the idea that I could make records by myself and play them with friends, whenever possible.

What are you studying in school? If you're an aspiring artist/musician, why go to college at all?

I'm studying philosophy. Which I'm always a little bit embarrassed to say because it's got a reputation of being the pretentious nerd's major, but I just really enjoy it. When I'm in philosophy classes, I feel like I'm getting the most out of school.

Going to college is valuable for me because I want forced exposure to other people and ideas. Even though I can read a lot of books, consume a lot of music, and learn a lot of things on my own at home, there's something valuable about having some stewards to that process for you. Being in circumstances where you're just forced to read stuff you wouldn't have otherwise read on your own.

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When I was younger I never wanted to sit at the kid's table. I was always with older people and my parents' friends. I'm sure working and touring with your dad so much, you probably have been the youngest person in the room a lot. Do you think it allowed you to have a clearer sense of what being a musician and going into this business would be like?

I do think that—and what you just described about your childhood was totally how I felt, too. My friends have always been older than I am. I feel comfortable with people older than me, even much older than me, like in my dad's generation who play in Tweedy and are around all the time. I do think that I've benefited a lot from being able to spend time with people older than I am and be respected by them.

I went to a Montessori elementary school. In Montessori schooling, you're allowed and encouraged to be friends with your teachers. Even in Kindergarten, I didn't see why age should be a barrier to connect, to appreciating somebody. It's a massive privilege, as a kid, to be shown that respect. I think a lot of kids aren't allowed to enjoy that respect from adults. On the other hand, I think it's lame when young people are like, "I hate my generation. I hate young people." I think that's a very arrogant attitude.

Ideally, you can be optimistic about your generation—not arrogant toward your own generation—but also aware of the fact that older people are really just people too.

Because of your dad's work there's some pre-generated interest in the things you do. How do you think that affects what you choose to make, if it does at all?

I try really not to think about that when I'm working on music by myself. I try as hard as I can not to imagine what people might think about it, how it will be received, or how it will be compared to my dad's work.

In general, I'm always really pleased whenever anybody says that something sounds like my dad. At least right now in my life, I don't feel like that's living under a shadow. I find it hard not to take that as anything other than a compliment. I think I'd be helpless to avoid it, but then even I aspire to it. I aspire to sound like that. On the darker side of things, it does make me feel a little bit anxious, just thinking about what people might assume about my privilege and about who might be helping me work on this song or what access to gear I have that enabled me to do it.

From growing up in that space, do you think that you already have a good grasp on how the music business works?

I think that I've been able to learn a lot of common misconceptions about the music industry, but a lot still feels uncertain to me. I know it's naïve to think that you're not naïve anymore [laughs]. I feel really lucky that I've been able to learn a lot about how it works already.

Generally speaking, people maybe don't have an understanding about the structures of music press and how it's not as simple as tweeting the link to your record and then a whole audience coming to you from there. People think it's more mysterious than it really is. That's not to say it's not mysterious at all. I think a lot of it is still weird and it's a lot of happenstance. But, there are real people working in every part of the music industry using their own judgment and physically responding to what shows up on their desk. It's not a total lottery system, crapshoot.

There are also tons of misconceptions about the economics of playing music. People will assume that if you've put out one record or if you are supporting a national touring act that that means you have a lot of money now and that you're a stably earning, working, musician. That's just not the case. I think people might be surprised to learn that even really popular acts don't earn as much money as it would seem they do. All that stuff, I think I've been able to pick up. I don't feel like any of it is certain, though.

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they do.

You and your family have access to a lot of resources, gear, studio space, etc.. Are you intimidated by the access to that stuff? Do you ever have trouble honing in on one thing?

Sometimes I think necessity is the mother of invention. It's good to have limits. It might be better for me if I had to work a little bit harder for some things in recording. That's all extremely relative. When it comes down to it, I'm still building this little studio by myself and trying to solve problems. I'm lucky that it's easier than it would be a lot of the time, but I don't know... There are always limits. You're always just trying to be creative within those limits.

Are you a tape/analog traditionalist?

No. That's something that I've thought about a lot over the past few years. It's been really hard for me to find a common ground between those two camps of pure, analog fetishes and progressive digital.

I think for the majority of my life I fell more into the progressive camp where I'm like, "I have to be okay with not using tape or other analog tools because it's inefficient." It's antiquated work flow. It has all this waste. More expensive. Like an Occam's razor... the other way is more simple. I had to find a way to figure out whether or not analog tools can fit into that mindset because they offer some other value. I also don't think it's cool to just use analog tools and tape because of an aesthetic identity. That's kind of thoughtless. We make some compromises about efficiency for character. Analog tools are sometimes valuable because they have this character. If we're willing to invest the time and energy in using them, then they're equal.

I think it's a really really weird mindset that we've come to think analog and digital are... I refuse to use the word dichotomy because it's so obnoxious and overused... I think we think of them as two opposing ideals. I think that's a mistake because digital tools are physical. They cash out into the physical universe.

Let's say you have the virtual file on a computer. That isn't actually virtual, it is represented in physical matter on a hard drive. I think it's an illusion that they're really that different. Thinking about all of that helps me to feel a little bit better about my tape machine, because I do use my tape machine once in awhile [laughs]. But, digital tools are accessible and they're everywhere. That's another point in digital tool's favor—they've allowed so many more people to make music. Maybe some studios will close, but that's tolerable to me if more kids are making records in their bedrooms.

Songs that sound just like an older song but wouldn't give grounds to sue in court by Spencer Tweedy:

1. "Omega Day" by Bill Fay and "Wildwood" by Steve Gunn
2. "Somebody Made for Me" by Emmitt Rhodes and "Ffunny Ffriends" by Unknown Mortal Orchestra
3. "He'd Send in the Army" by Gang of Four and "I Was Just Here" by Parquet Courts
4. "Too Many People" by Paul McCartney and "Heaven's Ladder" by Beck
5. "I Used to Be a King" by Graham Nash and "One by One" by Wilco
6. "Mind Games" by John Lennon and "Do You Realize??" by The Flaming Lips
7. "Crystal" by Buckingham Nicks and "Roll of the Eye" by Liam Finn
8. "Curry Land" by Donovan and "Forever Paradise" by The Undertones
9. "Chain Gang" by Sam Cooke, "Workin' in the Coal Mine" by Lee Dorsey, and "Nine Pound Steel" by Joe Simon
10. "By Tonight" by Mott the Hoople and "Walk Idiot Walk" by The Hives

Name

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Vocation

Musician

Fact

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Photo: Lenny Gilmore