Stuart Murdoch on the power of empathy



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Belle & Sebastian has been a band now for over 20 years. Has your way of working within the band, or the general band dynamic, changed much over time?

No, not really. We were never a group of people who might say say, “Okay, we must do it this way.” I don’t like that. I find that restricting yourself with arbitrary concepts and ideologies or just saying, “Okay, let’s stand on one leg and make a record and see what it sounds like” never feels right. I prefer an open approach. I think when you’ve been together with a group of people for so long, you can feel truly free. That’s the good side of things, because you’ve known them for a while and you get on with them and you know everybody’s strengths and weaknesses.

We recently had a guest singer come up to Glasgow to make a record with us, and she said her dream is to have a great guitarist live under her bed and be able to make great music with them at all times. I said, “Well, you know, I feel my dream has come true, because I’ve got this great band, and I don’t even have to write anything down.” I just go in and say, “Okay, here’s the melody and here’s the words and let’s just fill it in,” and then somebody else will suggest a different direction to the song and it will naturally evolve. We’re very lucky in that regard.

Since we first started it’s always kind of worked the same way—whoever’s written a song comes in, presents it to the group and jams it around and then kind of ends up producing the track. We follow their lead all the way through to the end. We’ve been able to get a bit more adventurous over the years because we have more confidence. For our most recent EPs we really did everything ourselves, mostly because we were all here and we hadn’t made a record in Glasgow for 10 years. We hadn’t self-produced an entire album for so long, so it was more a case of, “Well, can we still do this? Can we remember how to work the mixing desk? Would we be disciplined enough?” There were lots of upsides to doing it that way. Because we’re in Glasgow, we could leave songs and think about them later or we could focus on songs that we’d just written the night before. It was fun.

Sometimes you need a producer to be an objective outsider—a kind of disciplinarian that keeps everything on track, as well as steer towards a unified vision in terms of the sound.

Working with outside producers can be terrific. It can be amazing. I think as long as the group of people going into it are willing to give themselves up to the producer, it usually works. We’re a generally easygoing bunch. We’re pretty malleable. And for a group of six or seven people that’s been around for awhile, our egos aren’t too out of control. We’ve worked with some delightful producers and had lots of fun with them. The fact is that that they really do lift a lot of burdens from you, in a practical sense. Not only are they great collaborators, but they’ve generally got great engineers with them, which frees you up to just play.

When you decide to wrest control back and be masters of your own destiny again, that can be fun, too. I guess some of the people in the group were a little bit worried about being a ship without a rudder, but I was adamant that the main author of the song is always the producer of the song. We’ll always listen to the person who’s authored the song. It’s funny, yesterday, again, we were in with our guest singer and I was the nominated

producer because I had written the song with her. To be honest all I did as the “producer” was bring some Christmas lights and put them up in the vocal booth, and that’s all I did all day. You know? I went out and brought the sandwiches, but everybody else played and I just sat back, and was like, “Wow! That sounds great,” or you know, “Maybe you should try this.” or “Great, keep going!” So what a producer does is a sliding scale of somebody who keeps the party going to being the person creating the whole record. It’s somewhere in between.

My sense with Belle & Sebastian is that you’ve always kind of just done whatever you wanted. Did you ever feel shoehorned by that cycle of record, touring, record, touring?

Not too badly. Our minds have been pretty much working in parallel with whatever company was putting our music out. We drifted along. The initial stage was a kind of boy scout trail where we just played at being musicians and did whatever we wanted. And then when we signed to Rough Trade, we thought we would up our game and try to make a slight commercial dent in our particular niche. That was nice. We always wanted to try hard. But then, as everything started to tumble with the music industry, the recording budgets went from 100% down to about 20%. We just try to accommodate for whatever is happening, like a fish in the water that just needs a slight tap to move it in a certain direction. As I said, we’re pretty malleable.

We’ve had to be more careful about spending money and just general housekeeping, because we want to keep the party going. It’s all about being able to keep the band playing, putting on a good show, being able to take an occasional break. To be able to afford that we’ve got to be careful. It’s a little bit of a challenge to record for less and produce yourself and see what happens with that, to see if you can make enough bucks to keep going, but if you love playing in your band that’s what you do.

Someone told me recently that playing in a band was preferable to being a solo artist, because being in the band made them feel safe, that it felt more natural to be in a gang, as opposed to being out there by themselves. Is that how you feel?

For many, many reasons, I’m 100% a band person. Not only do I like being in bands, I prefer to listen to bands more than solo artists. On practical and spiritual levels, I prefer to be in the middle, in the mix. They support you in so many artistic and emotional ways, and also practical ways. Even the fact that I don’t have much energy, you know, I’ve got chronic fatigue and it’s always a factor. Just the fact that there’s so many people around helping makes a huge difference. It’s such a great thing, otherwise I wouldn’t get anything done. It would also be so hard to get anything done if you were trying to round up individuals all the time to play on your records. As a band, we’ve got this cozy cooperative, and people do what they can, and it’s wonderful. They let me sit and pontificate and write my songs while they play the music and set up the gear, so it works out great. [*laughs*]

Are you someone who has a pretty dedicated writing practice? Do you feel compelled to work on music everyday?

I’m absolutely *not* habitual about music, but I keep my little radar on all the time, my little mental satellite dish. I keep that out, because music comes to me all the time. Even this morning I was joking with my wife about this. She was sick last night, so she was sleeping in a different room, and I said, “How lucky you were, because at four o’clock I woke up. I’d had a dream somebody put a spider down my back, and then five o’clock I woke up, and a snake was biting my hand, and then six o’clock I woke up and I had this great tune!” In the dream, I was singing this song and then luckily I woke up and I had my phone there so I sang it into the phone. And that’s usually what happens, that’s where most of my music comes from. So you always have to jot those ideas down when they come. Otherwise, I’m really undisciplined about the creative process. I just keep a library of ideas, and then when we need to work, we’ll go to work. I just doss around Glasgow most of the time, just sitting in public transport and actually enjoying the countryside around the city, that’s what I like to do most.

You have a knack for narrative songwriting. What do you think it is about storytelling that appeals to you so specifically?

Well, it’s a serious business for me, but I don’t choose it. It just came along and it became life itself. Telling these stories became so important to me. Like I’ve said before, the band wouldn’t have happened unless I’d got sick all those years ago, and I had a faith awakening at the same time, and that’s when I started writing

music. All these things happened at the same time. Music was at the center of everything, and it's always been a great consolation to me. I've always been trying to solve my own problems through the music. Because I wasn't always such an active person, I've just always been looking at people and trying to figure out what they were doing and trying to have a degree of compassion towards them, so maybe I was trying to figure out their problems too. It certainly is a process to me, and it's very important.

Your songwriting really articulates feelings that resonate with people in such a specific way. As a result, Belle & Sebastian has a very dedicated kind of fandom.

It's nice. I always love it when people say that things we've made have helped them, that the songs have helped them. I can't help it, I just think life is a serious business. Everybody is suffering in some way or the other, and I like to be as positive as I can. I couldn't spend the amount of time I do making music and thinking about music if it didn't have a positive outlook, and that might seem kind of dorky to some, but that's just the way it is.

You know, there's a slight irony in the title of our EPs, *How to Solve Our Human Problems*. I've written a set of sleeve notes for each one based around the title, which comes from a Buddhist reader that I've been studying at the classes I go to. Although I agree with you that music can be very therapeutic and you can lean on it, the Buddhists would say that is slightly delusional, that the truth is different, and that the notion of leaning on art to solve your problems is not a great one. It doesn't have a great degree of validity or permanence. So I find myself sort of caught, because quite often one of the nuns I study with, when she's talking—and this is somebody who I revere and like a lot—she will say, "I mean, have you listened to pop music? Have you listened to these songs? These people are desperate! These people are so delusional!" I always have a little chuckle to myself when she goes on that particular speech.

As the state of the world becomes more perilous and the political landscape becomes more toxic, lots of artists are wrestling with this means for their work. What is my art really doing? Am I helping anything? Those seem like healthy questions to ask.

Absolutely. You have to respond, not only to what is happening in the world, but also just to what's happening to *you*, what's happening to your family. Most people have a desire to respond to problems in a positive and inquisitive way, and why shouldn't that include artists? So I know there's a lot of shit going down, but I think it's a good thing to still make art. We've had these discussions in the group as well about being useful. It has inspired us.

I think our general feeling, my general feeling, is a little bit akin to if the problems of the world just now in society and in politics are like a war, then we're kind of like the non-combatants, you know? I feel like I would be a war chaplain. I'd be the fellow running about the trenches just handing out cigarettes with a pocket bible and saying prayers for the soldiers. I think there's a limit to how much you can actually do in terms of anger and fighting, and fighting what's going on, and maybe the artist's job is to be more conciliatory. I don't know, different people have different attitudes.

Belle & Sebastian songs, while often cheeky, are also almost about empathy—being asked to relate to characters that might be outcasts or having a hard time. Often when I talk to musicians, they say, "It's so much easier for me to write sad songs, to be really nihilist, than it is to write something that's about articulating compassion or joy, for some reason," which is kind of sad, but also really telling about our culture.

I agree with you. Again, I guess it depends where you're coming from, and there is a sort of dorkiness to be able to write about joy, but I think perhaps that's where some of the words that have been bandied at us—things like "twee" or "precious" or whatever—maybe comes from that willingness to talk about the quiet joyful things in life. I think in general there's probably a large part of mainstream society that feels that there's something slightly ridiculous and suspect about talking about quiet joys, but I certainly don't feel that way. I think empathy is a powerful thing.

Stuart Murdoch recommends:

Recommendations… well, this morning I went to the early morning church service at the university, which they have every day, and today they didn't let me in because they were using the chapel for a BBC Radio program called *In Our Time* and I'm a great fan of this program. Basically, it talks about the history of ideas. It's a very broad scope. They pick a topic from history and then get experts in to chat about it. It's a nice, easy format and it's been going for many years, almost like a podcast before podcasts were really around. So I recommend that program, because you can listen to it online, and the chairman is a famous intellectual from the UK called Melvyn Bragg. They made me miss my church service this morning, but I still managed to get in a good walk.

Since we've been releasing EPs over the past few months I've been going back and revisiting some EPs that I love and that were very important to me as a music fan, just kind of thinking about the pleasures of the four-track, non-album format. This also gave me a chance to go back and listen to all those Cocteau Twins and Felt EPs I loved and try to decide which one that I loved the most. EPs feel like such an '80s phenomenon, but I'm not entirely sure why. People released EPs in the '60s, too. The Beatles had one. Maybe it grew out of that DIY thing of the 80s. The Buzzcocks famously released their debut as an EP, *Spiral Scratch*. It's almost like, "We want to do a single, we're making this ourselves, we're at the vinyl factory, but we want to show off a little bit, so like put another two tracks on, and we want to give you these two tracks for free." So I think EPs kind of grew out of the punk ethic, and then only just another three or four years later The Smiths became massive with that format as well. It always seemed so generous of them, every time they brought out a so-called single it felt like an event because, for example, they did "William It Was Really Nothing" but on the B-Side was "How Soon Is Now?" and "Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want."

So yeah, I've been going back and exploring my favorite EPs from the '80s. My favorite Cocteau Twins EP was one right in the middle, I think it was from about '85, called *Tiny Dynamine*. They had another one I loved called *Echoes in a Shallow Bay*. My favorite Felt EP was called *Ballad of the Band* and it's really wonderful. They always had these beautiful instrumentals that gave a chance for the individual band members to showcase how good they were, which was priceless.

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