Thor Harris on self-sufficiency



January 11, 2017 - Thor Harris is a musician, painter, writer, and carpenter (he built his own house). He was the percussionist in Swans from 2010 to 2016, and has performed with Shearwater, Bill Callahan, Ben Frost, and many others. He currently plays in Thor and Friends, who released their self-titled debut album in October 2016. Harris, an outspoken proponent of mental health advocacy, has published chapbooks of his drawings and writing. His "How To Live Like a King for Very Little" is a DIY classic.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2637 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration.

How does exercise fit into your life and help with your creativity?

I got really addicted to exercise when I was 15. I didn't realize what a profound effect it had on brain chemistry. I didn't know anything about brain chemistry then. I lived with depression, and probably had it my entire life, but something shifted when I started doing push-ups, running, and doing sit-ups. I didn't even have weights. I started this job as a roofer in Texas. So it was hot and hard manual labor all day long. Something shifted when I started doing exercise. Touring, of course, dictates that you're sedentary a lot, just because of the travel. So I have to come up with weird ways to get exercise. Walking certainly is a really good one. It's just a huge part of my survival as a human now.

There are all these companies where neurologists work to develop these puzzles that supposedly slow down the atrophy of our brains as we get older. That's great. Brain exercises are great, but those people will openly admit that the best thing you can do for brain health is physical exercise. It seems like the people who don't have anxiety are few and far between, and exercise is so good for that.

When you're touring, what would be an example of exercise? You said walking, but is there also the mindset of "I'm going to do push-ups in the hotel room," or whatever?

For a while, every time the van stopped, me and Jonathan Meiburg, the main dude in that band Shearwater, would get out and do 25 push-ups. Without something like that, you just go into this coma. We would make deals like that.

Our bodies are so amazing. A machine will get tired from overwork, and it will get worn out and stop working. Our bodies respond by making themselves stronger so they can accommodate the work. By expending energy, you end up with more energy, which is kind of counter-intuitive. I do try to sometimes run while I'm on tour. There isn't always time or space.

In Swans, the way you played percussion was very physical. You weren't sitting on a chair. You were standing up and just pounding things.

In Swans I quickly learned that I couldn't lift weights and play that show. That was just too much for my joints to bear. The show's two and a half hours. Especially starting in 2010, when we came back after the 14-year break, if I did that 2-hour marathon show, it was so violent and brutal that I didn't really need to [exercise]. That was like an aerobic workout for two and a half hours, every single day. The fact that it was so physical was a huge part of the show. It wasn't a piano recital. It was a ritual kind of beating. I think that's why people responded to it so well.

I was, of course, also loading a ton of gear—a shitload of gear—every single day with [Swans bassist] Chris Pravdica and [Swans guitarist] Norman Westerberg. Those guys sort of got into it. I have a sort of religious ritual about loading gear where it's part of the job. A lot of musicians kvetch about it. It's really not that hard of a job, compared to roofing or plumbing for 10 hours a day. You only have to work a few hours a day, and I want to be involved in that part of it. It's one of the few exercise opportunities.

In the new band, Thor & Friends, is it a stand-up kit or are you sitting down?

I play marimba and vibraphone. I'm standing up. I'm not playing drums yet at all, but what I want to have happen is… The core of the group is just three of us. My girlfriend, Peggy, this lady named Goat, and me. If we get kind bored of just marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, clarinet, then I want us to switch to playing drums. Peggy is a punk-rock drummer. When I met her, she was playing in this band that kind of sounded like Lightning Bolt. Spastic thrash kind of thing. I want us to eventually totally switch instruments and do a totally different thing.

The reason I even thought of talking to you about exercise: Once when I was in Austin for SXSW, you showed me your house. We walked through, and then we got to the backyard. There was a weight bench there and weights. It got me thinking about physical labor and physicality in general. You built your house. You lift weights in your backyard. Maybe you could talk about that process, or building a house, and the physical energy that goes into that.

I recommend it to anyone who has any inkling. It isn't hard to build a house. I've messed with tools for my entire life. You can learn all of that stuff, nowadays, on YouTube videos, how to do plumbing. I want to start making some videos: like, here's how you fix a toilet. If

your toilet's making this noise, this is why. Because I love those. I've gotten instruction on fixing cars through that.

So much of our world is not physical these days, which is amazing. The fact that we're so much more connected and information is so much more available. It's easy to bitch about the fact that we're stuck in front of these screens, but it's also, not to forget, a miracle that information just flies around the world so fast.

It's getting impossible to be oblivious anymore. On the other hand, doing some physical job like carpentry or plumbing… that's the trouble with touring. That's part of why I didn't do the 18-month Swans tour this year. It really forces you to do one thing all the time. For my brain to feel healthy, I need some degree of the tactile smoothing plant fibers in the wood shop, or soldering pipes together so that the water system works. This is just hugely satisfying, and in its own weird way, creative.

My brother doesn't think of himself as a creative person, but man, if you ever need a guy to figure out a design problem in building a house, that guy can do it. That's certainly creativity. I just don't believe that there are people who just aren't creative. There are people for whom it's hard to go against the rules. That can really hinder creativity. I think that's why all kids are creative. They're not trampled by rules.

Your brother, did he do the electrical work on your house, or you did it yourself?

I did it myself. I just called him. I would call him, or I would get him to show me. For years, I've said to people, "If you have one guy you can call that can tell you, 'Okay, you're looking at a black wire and two white wires, and a red wire.' If you have one guy you can call who can talk you through it, you can do it." But now that there's YouTubes of so much of that stuff, we all have the guy that can talk us through that stuff. For everyone, it's just a balance of living in the physical world and the information world. We happen to be the generation that this information explosion is… we're sort of like the pioneers of it. I'm 51, so there's a huge… I'm trying to learn a new language with computers. It is not easy. Fortunately, there are young people around.

You wrote "How To Live Like a King for Very Little," which explained how to live a less expensive life, essentially. A lot of that was learning how to fix things yourself, and how to do things yourself. Is the takeaway that people should learn to do more on their own, or rely less on hiring someone else to do something? Is becoming more self-sufficient the ultimate goal?

On end of the spectrum, you get specialized in one thing. Brain surgery, let's say. You get so good at that that you can pay someone else to do everything else in your life. On the other end of the spectrum, you never work a job, and you make everything you use, or you grow it, and you become sort of like a jack of all trades. Most of us live somewhere in the middle. Most of the people that I know can't afford, nor is it necessarily convenient, to always hire somebody else to do everything. I have to hire people.

I make zines now, too. In the old days, I would go make them in the copy store. Now, I want them to look a little bit better. I have to get somebody to help me with layout and stuff. I'm just not good at that, the computer programs. I'm working on a zine now. It's going to drive up the price of it, a little bit. There's this guy, Max Koch in Austin. He does letterpress. He's just so good at that. We want to still be inter-reliant on each other.

I certainly still want to be part of the economy, but the more things I can fix for myself, the less over the barrel I am when I can't afford something. I know that people are really afraid of their houses. Like, "Oh my god, what if I have some plumbing problem, and it costs me $10,000." Well, that's understandable, because it certainly could. In my case, when I didn't have $10,000, it was like, "Well, you better figure that out."

My dad died when I was 10. It was sort of like, "Well, there's just me and my brother now. Mom is a teacher. Let's figure out how to fix the car. We only have $500 to last until the end of the month." My brother was really good at figuring stuff like that out, and just accumulating information. My brain is kind of sieve. I can look at things and figure them out. I have good mechanical aptitude. Everybody loves learning. That list was just about life in the outer net. Life outside of our devices. Though the devices can certainly help us, too.

When you were touring with Swans, in these long, long tours, did you end up being the default person, if something in the car busted, you would fix it?

This is a true story. A lot of the time I think of my brain as kind of crappy, and sort of a piece of junk, but when something goes wrong, it actually works really well. We were recording that record, *My Father Will Guide Me up a Rope to the Sky*. We were in this basement studio, and this pipe broke. It was January and I think it was raining in Brooklyn. We were in this old rifle factory. There was some kind of roof drainage system that went right through the room we were recording in. This pipe, the joints just moved apart from each other, and freezing cold water started spewing down into this dungeon where we were recording. My brain was like, "This is going to be okay. If I can get up there with duct tape, even though everything's wet, I know duct tape sticks to duct tape."

Then I climbed up this 16-foot ladder to where the joint was, and duct taped it back together. The water still dripped a little bit, but I am the person, when some physical or mechanical thing went wrong, who would handle it. Other dudes were pretty good at that stuff, too. A lot of that is just confidence and, "Well, okay. This has to be fixed, and it probably is going to be me, so figure it out."

There is an important balance between having the ability to ask for help and self reliance. Being willing to do things for yourself. I've always wanted to keep that in check, my own sense of entitlement. Also, and it's easy to talk shit about America, but what we've at least tried to do is get rid of the class system here. We really innately believe, or at least a lot of us, that we're all on the same level. We

don’t have a royal family here. I’m not entirely comfortable being served, or having servants. I want to be part of the workforce.

Thor Harris recommends:

1. The Necks (a band)
2. Steve Reich - *Music For 18 Musicians*
3. Boren and der Club of Gore - *Piano Nights* (record)
4. Weight Lifting - so good for body and mind.
5. bicycle whenever possible
6. vegan diet - best for earth
7. *Darkness Visible* by William Styron
8. planting trees

We are Better Than This!!!! And some of us will survive by Thor Harris

1. Organize. Go to protests. Our numbers matter. When we are in the streets or on the Capitol steps, they know we are watching them. Protests are super fun, too! Smart foxy people shouting in the streets. It will restore your faith in humanity. I went to tons of them in the Bush years.

2. Republicans in the House and Senate are going to fucking *hate* him. Why? Because he is stupid and got the job they always wanted. Call them! Tell them you think his racist, xenophobic, misogynistic ideas are fucked. Call them often. Get them fighting amongst themselves. When they get nothing done, we are safe.

3. Talk to your Republican uncle. Tell him how this is a different kind of overt fascist. Make him uncomfortable with his complacency. Encourage him to sit out Election Day if he doesn’t fully understand the issues. Maybe he should smoke more and eat fatty foods.

4. Talk to your friends who think “fuck it” and don’t vote. Tell them they are why we are here.

5. Make art! Creativity and kindness are *the opposite* of what the Republican Party has come to stand for. Theirs is a path of Fear and Other.

6. Read! *New York Times*, Democracy Now, NPR, Reuters, BBC, *economist*, etc. Just don’t waste your time with crazy conspiracy theorists. Dipshits like Alex Jones helped him get elected. You need to know about specific policies that are being pushed and by whom.

7. Protect the vulnerable. Tell your mayor to make your city a Sanctuary City. This means that the cops don’t turn undocumented folks over to be sent back. This is a waste of our tax dollars. Give to Planned Parenthood and the NRDC and ACLU.

8. Don’t tolerate any bullying of anyone ever. Lots of micro-penis white power types have taken this as a call to bully brown people, black people, queers, etc. But most humans are by nature compassionate. We outnumber assholes by a lot.

9. Don’t stop ‘til we have a government you trust. The days of ugly, old, hateful white men running our country are coming to an end. Not a moment too soon. The liver spot train to Hell is leaving. Get the fuck out!

10. Boycott most things! Yep. Now is a great time to cripple the economy *and* learn to live more lean. Don’t need it? Don’t buy it. Fuck consumer culture. It’s how we got into this mess.

11. Talk about politics with anyone any time, but don’t insult them. Know a Trump voter? Tell them what he is doing to screw working Americans.

12. I’m sorry. I wish this list were more funny like my others. Now get out there and fight those cowards.

13. Remember! Never, ever, under any circumstances, have sex with a Republican.

Name
Thor Harris

Vocation
Musician, Writer, Poet, Artist

Fact

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Photo: Ebru Yildiz