

November 9, 2018 -

As told to Jordan Lee, 2055 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Independence, Mental health, Creative anxiety, Beginnings.



On the power of a collaborative community

The musician behind Mutual Benefit discusses the value of collaborative communities and what it means to be a part of a creative ecosystem that's bigger than yourself.

As I've reflected on my past 15 years of organizing and playing shows and working within formal and informal collective structures, I've realized the search for community has been a common thread connecting each phase of my life. Through self-organized music communities, I've been lucky to learn from a rich patchwork of people all over the world, as well as from messy, painful situations that have equally informed my perspective and made me less naive. If this story had an arc it might be that what started out as a way to find some friends and share music became a life's pursuit of trying to become a better listener, and learning how to organize and care for others in a way that is far more powerful than internet clicks.

With the lived knowledge that most DIY spaces will eventually be shuttered by unsympathetic landlords or due to the effects of collective burnout, I still believe in the act of finding people who want to make the world better than the hyper-capitalistic status quo, and in listening, working, and dreaming together. For me, this is absolutely paramount to making it through this wacky planet we were born on.

Growing up in suburban Ohio I found community through two of the most readily available ways: by leading music at the church my parents helped start, and later by putting together shows for high school bands in VFW halls and basements. In both cases I was fascinated by the behind-the-scenes minutiae of bringing people together, even eavesdropping on the church meetings held at our house where complicated bylaws were being written and debated. I was drawn to people who felt a sense of purpose from contributing to the whole, especially by performing thankless tasks like mowing the church lawn or picking up trash after a basement show.

In those early years, I was deeply influenced by how music would occasionally create moments of collective transcendence. After high school, I moved to Texas for a recording internship, and even though I was phasing out of organized religion and mall punk bands, it still left a big hole in my life to suddenly not be surrounded by people who I could book shows and play terrible music with.

It is safe to say that I was (and probably still am) deeply uncool, so I spent an aimless couple of years in Austin trying to figure out where I fit in and making little songs in my bedroom. At some point a coworker showed me a music blog on Tumblr and it felt like a revelation. I couldn't believe these writers were spending their time listening to and sharing music from musicians who weren't on any label, who were making songs with the same cheap equipment that I had! I went all the way down the rabbit hole and spent my evenings and weekends downloading mp3s and soaking up as much information as I could and trying to connect the dots between scenes. The energy felt similar to when I was a part of throwing basement shows; there wasn't any money to be made by anyone, and everyone was a contributor in some way instead of just reproducing the idol/fan dynamic.

Eventually I made a music blog of my own, slowly befriended a disparate group of like-minded writers and musicians, and reluctantly shared the songs I had been toiling away on under the name Mutual Benefit. My Tumblr page was mostly dedicated to sharing other people's music, but when I occasionally shared my own, I'd get some crucial encouragement that gave me the confidence to keep working on my craft.

Ten years ago the internet wasn't quite so commodified, and because of this, it felt a lot more human. If I really liked someone's work I would write them a heartfelt email and almost always get an open and personal response back. When I had enough songs to make an EP, I decided to make a label to share my own work, and to highlight some of the other bands I had met through the internet. Cassettes seemed like the perfect accompaniment to our little corner of the web, since they were this abandoned format that was also cheap and easy to dub yourself in small runs. So, Kasette Klub was born and christened with the motto, "Do cool stuff and be kind to each other."

I got my first taste of touring in 2010 when I was invited to open up a couple shows for some online acquaintances on the West Coast. I quit my jobs, sold my stuff, and put together a band of some of the same high school bandmates from Ohio. I imagine we sounded pretty bad. An enduringly favorite burn was the *San Francisco Chronicle* saying we should be called "Vampire Weekday." But being in that van going down the

California coast with this hilarious and supportive crew of musicians from Brooklyn, and meeting these generous people every night who would let us crash at their houses, opened up a completely different mode of existing. I remember seeing the Pacific Ocean for the first time and weeping with happiness. After this trip, my bandmate convinced me to move to Boston to be a part of a bigger music scene, where I'd end up sleeping on the floor of a jam-band rehearsal space.

Cycling through odd jobs, sublets, couches, and tours, I was living the good and the bad of being unanchored in Boston. Through it all, I was inspired enough to write many EPs. There was usually no privacy, so the songs would include whoever was around and whichever instruments there were where I was crashing. I think that openness to possibility became a big part of my songwriting process. My friends and I started to use the internet to book tours where the shows ranged between peaceful potlucks, raging college parties, and "sorry dude, I spaced on inviting anyone." But I was getting a chance to meet so many of the people who had previously only existed on my computer screen, and I was so grateful for the shrinking of space between being online and off.

Around this time, the energy from the Occupy movement gave new language to the ethos of ignoring corporate structures and working within informal, values-driven underground touring networks. We met so many kind freaks who fed us and gave us gas money to come through their small towns, while Boston itself had an incredible infrastructure for house shows with its very own DIY showpaper.

As time went on, though, my telemarketing job that paid the rent was becoming unbearable. And after mental health and drug crises swept through my family and friend groups, I felt a deep futility about what I was doing. It seemed like the online friends who once felt like my main community were experiencing a similar emotional and financial burnout from so much unpaid digital labor, which was only rewarded by even more emails. At this point, I kind of dropped out of society, moved into a free room in St. Louis offered by a sympathetic friend, and put all of my energy into making an album in order to convince myself that life had meaning.

We eventually put the album out on Bandcamp and were completely flabbergasted when it was deemed "the important thing of the moment" by some of the biggest music websites. I had managed to make it through a decade of completely immersing myself in music while mostly avoiding the music biz, but overnight they all showed up in my inbox and wanted to take me to fancy restaurants with names I couldn't pronounce.

I'm obviously hugely grateful that *Love's Crushing Diamond* found critical success, but it was also incredibly isolating. Each friendship and collaboration was cast in a new light, and my own ineptitude at navigating the music world led to many instances of bruised egos and tragic miscommunications. My collaborative openness that was being touted on press releases was being replaced by closing myself off and only working with a couple of people who knew me long enough to not treat me strangely.

There are good and bad people in the music industry, but overall I was surprised at the philosophy of scarcity of goodness that abounded. There appeared to be this idea that there is only a limited amount of attention in the world, and you had to do everything you could to continue being a relevant buzz band. I remember one record executive telling me that "house shows are like playing the penny slots at the casino, I know the guys in the back room who are making the big bets." Yikes! Was the music coming out of my soul really something that rich guys were speculating over in a smoky lair? Who would want that? I had always done things like Kassetta Klub because it felt intrinsically right, but now I was seeing exactly how messed up the mainstream alternatives were.

Right as the Boston cops were systematically shutting down every house venue, I decided it would make more sense for me to live in New York. I moved into the now-defunct DIY community space Silent Barn, and started work on another album at the recording studio there. This was shortly after the Barn started the effort of being "above ground" and worked with the city to get everything up to code so they weren't always at risk of getting shut down.

It was healing to be within a structure that had the manic energy of being a huge work in progress. I paid special attention to the older collective members who hadn't lost their wonder and had made it all the way into full adulthood still prioritizing art making, idealism, and general mischief over comfort. It was helpful to realize that "growing up" didn't have to mean becoming cynical and uncreative, and that the experience I had gained wasn't for nothing. Although I was only on the fringes of the collective, Silent Barn made me a lot more realistic about the overwhelming amount of labor it takes to make a space like that run smoothly. It is something I will never take for granted again.

As I was working on my newest album, *Thunder Follows the Light*, I finally had to acknowledge that most of the websites and platforms that had once facilitated meaningful community in my life now filled me with the same anxiety as being shouted at by the television. I retreated into books and was especially moved by *The Hidden Lives of Trees*. In vivid detail, Peter Wohlleben writes about the complex interactions happening above and below ground in old-growth forests that make it such an enduring environment of mutual aid. I started to see what my friends and I were trying to do more in that light.

It gives me hope to think how this music project is part of a vast web of elevated and underground connections. I like to imagine all the people and places who have intersected with our roots over the past 10 years of recording and touring, and how we've changed each other. Or how the things we make can go away, but the people involved stay bounded together in less visible ways. At the same time, I'm increasingly aware that underground art scenes often reproduce the same biases that exist in the mainstream, and am so glad more is being done to address it. As I recontextualize past "golden ages of DIY" under a clearer historical lens, I see that there was and is vast room for improvement.

Being part of a collaborative community has always been a guiding force and a powerful alternative to the powerlessness of being a passive consumer, but the truth is that I don't know anything for sure. I imagine that communities run off of empathy, which is something I learned through research, shutting up, and listening with an open heart. I have noticed that many social networks are specifically *not* built to achieve this, so it is more important than ever to rely on each other instead of megacorporations. For me, it has been a strange path, but I'm sure it has been worth it.

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Photo: Stephanie Griffin

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