

On subverting expectations



Actor, comedian, director, and musician Tim Heidecker on creative partnerships, not being a master of any one thing, and the value of figuring it out as you go along.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 1994 words.

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Your new record *Fear of Death* touches on themes of mortality and midlife anxiety. Do you feel pressure to stay creative as you age?

Some days I feel I'm doing a million things, some days I feel I'm being extremely unproductive. This particular period of time is weird because there's a lot coming out at once including the record and this new show *Moon Base* that I made a while ago. It's not the best perception of how busy I am or what I'm up to right now.

There are two different ways of thinking about what I want to do creatively. One is I have an idea that festers in my brain and wants to come out in the best way possible. The other is figuring out what I want to do with my career from a more macro view. Do [Eric](#) and I want to make a show that doesn't feel like a Tim and Eric show? Do I want to act more? Then it comes down to scheduling and all these other real world factors.

Your output has been described as prolific. How do you maximize your time? Do you consider this a strength?

I don't think I'm a master of anything, but I'm pretty good at a lot of different things. One of my strengths has been not putting all my eggs in one basket, not being hyper focused on one thing. I also have a few very close creative partnerships that differ from each other, but are all important to me. That has a lot to do with the connection I have with those people. Part of creation is social.

Your political songs are written and released quickly to capture a snapshot in time. How does your pacing vary between projects?

I don't spend a terrible amount of time writing or thinking about what something is going to be. You have to start with something strong that you care about, then try to make it the best thing you can but not hyper-analyze what it is and how it's going to be. Those answers present themselves later, or they become clearer. I don't have everything figured out before I begin the production of something. I could, maybe I should? I don't know. It feels more fun to just be okay with not knowing. This is something [Bob Odenkirk](#) taught us a long time ago about television. He said you're not going to know what kind of show you're making until the fourth episode. What's the point in writing a big treatise about what it is? Just start doing it and figure it out.

That's tied into the fact that almost everything I do lives in a low budget kind of place. Unless it's Eric and I directing a commercial, which is a whole different thing, and not coming from my own creativity. Most of these are the limitations. There's not a lot of money. There's very little time. This is the window that this person is available. You strike as hard as you can and hope it all works.

What do you use to get ideas down quickly? How do you choose which to revisit?

Musically, the voice memo app. The song "Nothing" and a couple others started while I was singing while driving. Then I take them home and sit with the piano or guitar and try to figure out chords and structure. If I like something, I'll record that and think about what kind of subject matter I want to sing about. For comedy ideas sometimes I will do a voice memo, a dictated kind of thing. Those often get lost or I don't listen to them again. Generally the ideas that go on to become something that you would ever see are the ones that stick in your head. You think about them before you go to bed and when you wake up. They don't even need to be written down for a while.

A lot of times my main form of collaboration is texting, sending quick ideas to whoever it may be, musical or comedy or whatever. Eric and I have always worked that way. Even from a long time ago over instant messenger, just sitting at our respective jobs goofing around in that format. There's something very comfortable about it.

The album is beautiful. You gave each musician plenty of room to color the songs and play to their strengths. Are you conscious of this when in collaboration?

Certainly on this record. The people playing on it are so good and have such good taste. They know what they're there for, to help my record sound as good as possible. It's very collaborative, but also supportive. I defer to them and I will give them notes, thoughts, or a line that was in my head. I'm totally excited when they come with ideas. I say, "Just take a pass at it and see what it sounds like," that is way more fun. It's a discovery process. Even back when we were doing *Awesome Show*, we'd always bring in somebody like Will Forte or Zach Galifianakis and say "Here's this rough idea for a sketch we think you'd be really funny in, go shoot your wad or whatever." We just sit back and laugh and throw them ideas when they get lost. I don't ever feel hyper controlling, at least at the stage where you're just shooting away trying to find something. My instinct is to sit and be supportive and not be didactic about it.

You don't seem particularly precious about what you put into the world. How do you tell when an idea or a project is finished?

I've said this on Twitter last year around *Mr. America*. The most fun, positive, collaborative, greatest thing I can do in my life is to make something with my friends. The worst thing I can do is put it out. That's the part where you get judgment and other people involved that weren't there at the beginning. Most of the time everyone has good intentions, but you always end up having to explain yourself again and again. It's never going to be what everybody across the board wants. For whatever reason, that affects me. I enjoy the collaboration, getting the best version out of my head and onto something that's going to last a long time. I like that early process of playing it for close friends, playing it for my family. Then it gets to this place where I start talking about it a lot and I get a little confused about what it even is. Then it comes out and it can feel like ancient history pretty quick for me. People are going to like it or not. That doesn't affect me one way or the other too much.

There's a moment before you release an album where the music is just for you.

Nobody is going to care about it as much as I care about it. Your closest friends are going to be like, "Cool man, I'm proud of you." I don't know if they're at home, putting up a poster of me on their bedroom wall. "Yeah, fucking Tim did another record. Cool, it sounds good." There's going to be people I don't know where this record is very meaningful to them. They appreciate it probably more than any of my friends would. It's a little strange.

Do you look/listen back to your own material? Do you recognize yourself in it?

It doesn't come up very much. If I'm getting ready to do a show where I have to listen to the songs to remember how to play it or something I would. I didn't watch *Awesome Show* until years after it came out. Now it's fun to look back on because it feels really removed from my life. I can watch it almost as a fan. I'm not there yet with some of my more recent records.

People have an inherent need to define and understand a person. If you're really good at one thing, people tend to reject your efforts to be good at something else. How have you managed the 'stay in in your lane' feedback as a multidisciplinary artist?

I get it a lot and it bugs me to some degree. I want people to be more open minded than they are. Especially my fans, because I think they're already prone to being open minded, you'd think. I have some understanding that the kind of music I like and make isn't necessarily going to be a perfect Venn diagram. The music I make is not popular music anymore, especially with a younger crowd. I give a lot of attention to a very small, but loud group of people. It's all guys, and they grumble about every little thing. I just noticed on Reddit, somebody re-posted a 30 second *Moon Base* trailer. We were all excited about it. Then I look on Reddit and it's 90% positive, but somebody is like, "I don't know, this doesn't feel like a Tim and Eric thing." I'm just like, "Shut the fuck up." First of all, why do you care? You just want to shake them and go "What the fuck are you worried about? Shut up!"

I put that sentiment to my audience in the song "Little Lamb." A certain percentage of my audience says, "stick to comedy," or "I liked you better when you were doing this." One way of dealing with that is to very arrogantly say "Well then fuck off, go away." "I don't really want that. I don't really care what you want."

You've managed to subvert expectations both creatively and politically. Who else does this well in your opinion?

I don't know who does it now. In a way, Eric does it in the sense that he's doing a lot of food and wine, and it's different from the kind of work we made together. Bob Dylan for me was the guy in his career who was always changing the perception people had of him in dramatic shifts. He's a protest singer for two years and by the third year, he's a psychedelic dude. Two years later, he's living on a farm. Two years after that he's wearing clown makeup on stage doing a traveling circus. He subverted the expectations people had of him very successfully. He stayed relevant and interesting doing that.

Your work tends to blur the lines of comedy, darkness, and sincerity. Some might not always "get it" at first. How important is it for someone to "get" your work?

I'm never intentionally trying to alienate anybody. That tends to be surprising for some people to hear. I've always rejected the idea of anti-comedy. Everybody that gets labeled that, we feel the same way. We're not trying to turn you off to what we want to say, we're just doing what we think is funny. Come along for the ride, but we're not going to do fan service, we're not going to try to convene a focus group or overly think about whether it's good or not.

Outside of creative projects, what's bringing you joy?

Oh, well, nothing. Nowadays there's nothing fun to do. There's responsibilities and talking to friends or spending time with your children, but there's nothing to look forward to. That's not entirely true, but I'm sure everyone can relate to that feeling. You can't go outside, you can't go inside. I do have my family, my kids, my house, and projects that occupy my time. And TV, the great closer of the evening.

Tim Heidecker Recommends:

[Patriot](#) (Amazon Show)

[Beat Club](#) (YouTube Channel of old German rock show...)

[The Faces](#)

oat butter

long walks

[Name](#)

Tim Heidecker

Vocation

Actor, comedian, musician, writer, and director

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Cara Robbins