

On art as a devotional practice



Artist, author, and media producer Matt Marble discusses chaos as the seed of creation, the pitfalls of toxic positivity, and transmuting stress into creative practice.

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As told to René Kladzyk, 3180 words.

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You do so many extraordinary things—would you mind briefly summarizing all your various forms of creative output to begin?

Over the last decade I've become fixated on exploring the relationship between numinous experience, metaphysics, and music, and more broadly the creative process. So as an artist, that informs my work—I draw from dreams, I draw from metaphysical philosophy. I'm really inspired by all these things.

So that led me to ask "What was my lineage?," and I couldn't find it when I went looking for it. So I went digging and researching and basically collecting all these artists through history who have had similar interests in connecting the creative process with spiritual perspective. Basically all my work pertains to that, whether it's through my own creative process and making music or painting, or by researching the history and philosophy of these traditions and the artists that applied them in their art. That's kind of it in a nutshell. I developed the American Museum of Paramusicology to house or umbrella this larger [aim], all the different things that are attached to that, whether it's podcasts or writing or archival collection.

It seems like you probably have finely honed project management skills, given the sheer output of information-dense projects that you have undertaken. Can you tell me a little bit about how you go about organizing projects?

It can get pretty chaotic at times. Everything is, to me, based on inspiration. So whether that's a creative project that I'm working on or a historical figure that I'm studying, wherever the inspiration leads me, I collect those things. So on my computer I have lots of folders and in my space, I have lots of stacks. And sometimes things are more forthcoming than others. Other times I'm waiting on an archivist to get back to me about this thing I'm researching or I'm trying to track down something but can't find it.

And I like it to be that open. I pretty much work for myself, don't make much money at all, live in my mother's attic in basic poverty, but that all allows me this freedom to work the way that I do. I'm not beholden to anyone, so I just respond to the inspiration. It's very synchronistic and natural the way things come together. And that's how I love to work, that's how I love to live my life when I'm able.

It sounds like you've been very intentional in making sacrifices in order to have the space to center your creative work in your life. Can you talk a little bit about that decision-making process?

Yeah, some of it's a decision and some of it's circumstantial. For the last 10 years, I've been doing delivery jobs, waiting tables, factory work, and I just quit my job at a grocery store after being harassed by customers and having a horrible experience there. So I'm kind of in limbo right now and really devoting myself to the work

while I have this free time. It's not ideal, but I do find that having these kinds of low wage jobs allows me to check them at the door so that when I come home my focus is entirely devoted to this practice.

The stress that comes along with a lot of those jobs and the financial stress of life, those stresses don't disappear when you get success or financial stability, they just transform themselves into something else. So I find that the way to work with that stress is to transmute it into the art practice, transmute it into devotional work. It is a balancing act. When I look back on things, I can become bitter, I can feel kind of self-victimizing, but at the end of the day, I know that it's not going to ever be any better than it is right now. There has to be some sort of peace. Deep inside, you have to realize that all of this is just an ephemeral thing.

I'm still working out my path in that regard and I'd like what I do to become self-sustaining. But at the same time, I see that alienate people—when the creative practice becomes a means to an end to get money, it can often corrupt the practice, but that's not a guaranteed outcome. There is a part of me that almost prefers to struggle in order to preserve the total freedom that that allows. My perspective on that changes a lot, I have to ask myself that question a lot.

It sounds like to some extent, you have to be in a constant process of negotiating how you feel about what sustainability means, and what freedom means in creative practice.

We live in this culture where everybody's a life coach. There's kind of a toxic positivity that has taken hold. And this idea of manifesting—that's the most popular version of metaphysics in our culture. To me, it becomes very self-centered, it becomes very materialistic and delusional. Most of the things that we think we want, when we get them, they're not what we thought they were, or we've changed and we don't want them anymore. So this idea of having some sort of utopian vision of the way life is supposed to be is really almost impossible. That's not to say that we shouldn't recognize what we care about and pursue our dreams and that kind of thing, but this idea of manifesting your destiny and trying to control it in that way seems very misguided to me. But at the same time, I could maybe use a little more of that.

Going back to your response about organizational approach, it sounds like you feel comfortable with the amount of chaos that you are welcoming in. So maybe instead of trying to control your destiny, it's just having a developed relationship with chaos.

Yeah, I require chaos. It's really vital to everything I care about.

Can you tell me more?

Well, a lot of my creative practices, these more open forms that allow a certain amount of chaos into the process that break down your inhibitions and your habitual way of doing things. I have to try to get to that place where those habits dissolve and something natural and serendipitous can arise. That's the goal of art for me, to touch base with that serendipity and be present with it.

When there's not any chaos, everything becomes very rigid very quickly and we attach ourselves to things. Even in music, for example, you come up with a nice melody or a cool lyric and you attach yourself to it because you're proud of it and you love it. But a lot of times when we attach too much to something like that, it prevents us from developing it further, or it prevents us from new ideas that come in or other people's perspectives. So that kind of non-attachment, which to me is a gentle form of chaos, is really important in the creative process and in our lives because we can box ourselves in pretty easily.

I have kind of a big question for you that relates to this—where do you believe ideas come from?

I am inclined to use terms like universal consciousness or something to that effect. I love David Lynch's description of fishing: the deeper you cast your pole, the bigger the thoughts are down there. But it's really clearing that space, it's dissolving all of those habits, all of those obstacles that get in your way to create an open space where an idea can come up.

Can you expand on that a little more? You have such deep familiarity with different ways that people have gone about accessing what we might call universal consciousness, plucking things from the ether, communicating with the muses...

There's a billion terms.

With all that you've learned, what are some of your favorite tactics you have seen artists using to make space for new ideas?

That's a good question, I have like a thousand different artists in my head. I'm very inspired, for example, by the use of meditation in the music of [Arthur Farwell](#) or [Irma Glen](#), the use of dreams by [Rahsaan Roland Kirk](#), astrology by [Kelan Phil Cohran](#) and [Richard Tyler](#), numerology by [Arthur Russell](#) and in early hip hop philosophy, or the use of mediumship in the music of [Francis Grierson](#), [Exuma](#), and [Merceditas Valdés](#)—there are innumerable examples. Methodology isn't everything, and sometimes we can get stuck in the methods we embrace.

But I tend to personally be drawn towards artists who share my own affinities for dreamwork: working with symbolism and translation across different media, involving multiple senses. Dreamwork is pretty central and that's probably one of the more pervasive creative methods across cultures and art media. A lot of that has to do with working with symbols that are gifted to you, ideas that are gifted to you.

And that doesn't have to be necessarily just in sleep, like the beats and a lot of other artists would describe your relationship walking around the city, taking notice of the word on the street sign or recognizing a flower, just observing what's right in front of you. That's the same kind of gift that we get when we have a dream, even though it's a little more enigmatic. I guess for me and a lot of the artists that I've looked at, collecting those experiences and really treasuring them is probably the greatest gift. That and meditation, just clearing your head and centering yourself. Paying attention to what's right around you and right inside you if you're asleep. Those are the most important things that I've continuously come across.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your spiritual upbringing and early metaphysical influences?

I grew up in the Episcopal church. My father was a bishop in Mississippi and later in North Carolina. He was not very dogmatic, it was all about social justice, environmentalism, eating, music, joy—things I could relate to and had no instinct to push away. But the church itself was very alienating to me and I found myself having an allergy to Messiahs in general. So I was always drawn from an early age to very mystical traditions. I read [The Cloud of Unknowing](#) at a young age and Simone Weil at a young age and those two in particular had a huge influence on me. Psychedelics, LSD also played a huge role in kind of opening my mind. And yeah, music was always trance-based for me. Really I would say losing myself, but it's more like finding yourself in the music. And that was something I didn't understand as a teenager. It was mesmerizing and it became the goal.

I kind of pushed spiritual stuff away for quite a while. I would say like half my life. Partly because I was raised in the church and had bad experiences, outside of my father who was a really positive influence. It took a long time. I basically had to suffer quite a bit before I was receptive to it and then it saved my life, dreamwork in particular. That and engaging Arthur [Russell]'s Buddhist influences really opened my eyes to exploring it all more. I used my dreams to pull myself out of a really dark hole. I had to quit alcohol and everything else all at once. And when I did that—I don't pray a lot, but I prayed that day—I was like, "I promise to myself that I would devote myself to this work if I could survive," because I was not doing well. And so there was a vow that I made to myself to really devote myself to it.

Thanks for sharing that. I wonder if there's any advice that you'd like to share for others who are struggling in similar ways?

The transition out of that, especially if you're struggling with alcoholism or anything like that, becomes the main obstacle to confront. I found that I had to find ways to hold on to whatever inspiration I could hold onto. So making music, for example, I didn't have time or the energy to work on a long piece. So I would just start doing improvisatory songs for like 30 seconds or a minute. Something that I could feel like had a wholeness to

it, that contained something inspiring, that came from a place of inspiration. So that when space opened up or time opened up, I was able to come back and really feel like I could fly a little more.

That was an important discovery. I know a lot of people are like, I can't do what I want to do, so I'm not going to do it at all. A big part of my development [is] being able to be adaptive to different forms of creativity and finding what you're capable of doing in the circumstances you're in. If you can tap into that, there's an even greater chance that that can grow and that that can sustain you through a hard time. And when you come out of it, then you're on the other side and you planted all these seeds and you can have a garden. And that's when I was making the podcast Secret Sound. I was holding onto that when I was a bad alcoholic and I would have to clean myself up to do that.

And when I made that vow and I quit drinking—this was at the beginning of the pandemic—I was like, I know if I plant these seeds now, it's going to grow on the other side. And I've stuck with it. I'm still struggling in various ways, but I'm really grateful for holding on, for keeping on top of it. I guess to answer your question, it's being patient and being adaptable to different ways of accessing your creativity and engaging what inspires you.

Can you share what you feel most hopeful about, some of your goals for the future connected to your work?

At some point, I'd like to have this large collection of archival materials to share with people, so I'm hoping to find ways to do that. Ultimately, it would be great to have an exhibition space, either at my home or another space. One of the most important things to me, in life and in creativity, is really about what you bring together, the disparate things that are separated otherwise, that you bring together and form a greater meaning. And that's what I've been trying to do with this archive. I'm strategizing and hopeful that that can be the end game, where I can at least offer an introduction or an overview of metaphysics that is not delusional, that is not narcissistic, that is not spiritually materialistic, but that stirs inspiration. That's the goal.

Yeah, it sounds like part of your goal is to function as a translator, connecting those threads so that those resources can be helpful to other people too.

Yeah, and also recognizing that we're all so different. I think this is something people lose sight of, because once people find a tradition that they love, it becomes this totalizing thing. Especially when you look at metaphysics, it all comes out of specific personalities. Some people are really into contemplative mysticism and they like complicated philosophy and crazy diagrams that they can really work through. Other people need a more extroverted role-playing thing where they do ceremonial magic and put on outfits and have objects and stuff, then other people need just a simple prayer or quiet meditation with no thinking. And so realizing that a lot of the things I study and share aren't necessarily things that I'm into, but I know that for somebody out there, it's perfect. It's exactly the opening that they need. So that's why it's really important for me to do a comparative offering.

Matt Marble recommends

General: Some recent and ongoing inspirations: basil/banana pancakes, writings on various non-dual philosophies (*The Doctrine of Vibration*, *Voice of the Void*, Dionysius Andreas Freher, David Chaim Smith), the art and writing of Justin Duerr, the life work of Peter Lamborn Wilson, Howard Thurman, and Theora Hamblett, the stand-up & move-around comedy of Jacqueline Novak and Chris Flemming, the cinematic work of Boots Riley and Ari Aster, the inspiring research and online curation of Psychic Research Inc., The Rose Books & Obscurities, and Curio Esoterica, Emma Stone in her zone, the steadfast media provisions of Canary Records, Blank Forms, and Gutbucket Research, and the non-anti-semitic recognition and pro-active discourse surrounding the actual ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people.

Music: My current treasured listening includes the recent vocal album (*Souvenirs*) by the late Emahoy Tsege Mariam Gebru for calming the mind and softening the heart; Clarissa Connelly's discography for dancing in the unknowable; Ecoegoe's "Ecoegoe" for entrancing bliss textures; The Platters' "My Prayer" for soulful dream root; Cassandra Miller's "I cannot love without trembling (viola concerto)" for the transmuting power of its psycho-sonic flame; and Arthur Russell's latest album *Picture of Bunny Rabbit* for flying heart of radical innocence. Sun

Ra, always, for mythic liberation and joy-play of cosmic YES.

Dreamwork: Dreamwork saved my life and helped me overcome drug addiction. Even though I don't dream much these days, I still personally return to this practice and I advocate it for others. A very accessible mass market intro: Strephon Kaplan's *Dreamwork*; Deeper considerations: Barbara Hannah's *Encounters with the Soul: Active Imagination*; My personal favorite book on dreamwork, Peter Lamborn Wilson's *Shower of Stars* (hard to find, but a reissue is in the works). That said, our greater collective nightmare is now taking place in Gaza; may we do the proper dreamwork there and compel a CEASEFIRE IN PALESTINE.

Archival Sources: IAPSOP.com and Newspapers.org, IAPSOP is the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, and it's free. Newspapers.org offers a vast repository of digital newspaper archives from American history, for an annual rate. As an historical researcher into art/music and metaphysics, I find myself diving deep into these digital archives almost daily. Start with a topic of interest and see where you end up. Time is an illusion, history influences who we are and how we conceive the future—history is now; meaningful awareness is timeless.

The American Museum of Paramusicology (AMP): I encourage everyone to subscribe or explore the AMP. There are free offerings for perusal, while subscribers gain access to podcasts, digital journals, audio interviews, archival offerings, and more. By engaging the AMP you can become familiar with a wide variety of metaphysical traditions and perspectives, while discovering a new, diverse, and fascinating history of American music by and beyond all genres. The AMP also features interviews and contributions from contemporary artists and metaphysical perspectives.

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Vocation

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