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As told to Adrian Rowland, 2496 words.

Tags: Music, Culture, Inspiration, Production, Day jobs, Time management, Collaboration.

On being part of a community

Audio engineer and producer Mike Petillo on authenticity, changing priorities and approaches as you get older, staying positive, and the benefits of being in the same room as your collaborator.

Tell me a little bit about where you got your start.

I'm 39 years old now, and I've been playing music in some sort of serious way for 10 to 15 years. I was in bands before, and we'd do some touring and put out a 7-inch once every couple of years—maybe an album. It was a lot slower. We'd played a lot of shows, but we didn't release a lot of music, so it felt like a different kind of experience as a musician. Plus it was a different style of music—punk and rock-based.

That's where I got my start, playing bands and touring, writing material, doing a lot of the productions of the records ourselves and recording on 4-track cassettes and then friends' studios and friends' basements. Some real studios and such, but usually cobbled together in some fashion. Recently my experience in music has shifted to focusing on studio production and trying to put out more material and release more music into the world.

You're working entirely in music now, right?

I manage the Tonal Park recording studio in Takoma Park, and that's where I work. That's my 9-to-5 job, but it's sort of an all-consuming aspect of my life, up until the recent changes to civilization. That's where I physically was for a while, being in that facility, helping other people work there and doing my own stuff there, pretty much handling all the aspects. It's a hybrid situation where I'll work with people there at the studio and then there's my own production work that's slotted in.

How do you separate your life being in and out of the studio?

I work on the schedule at the studio and know everything happening there, when I have to be around. My life's pretty planned out. I work some evenings and work some weekends, but have a balance and work it out with my partner. The biggest aspect is me being available as a human being and me being in that studio world. Figuring that out is the critical part.

I don't have children at the moment, so that makes it a lot easier to live this kind of lifestyle. This is a killer job for someone that's just a bit younger than me in some aspects, because if you really want to just camp out and live a dirtbag lifestyle in a studio, never go to sleep, be in there all the time, and not have a lot of other responsibilities, it's so possible—if you can find a studio to work at.

But I'm not recommending that [laughs]. There's definitely been a shift in the past few years for me where I've had to get a little bit more regimented and self-controlling. Getting sleep and stuff like that. The basics.

With the engineering projects that I get involved with now, I try to have a fair amount of stuff that's simply not going to be an obsessive wormhole of a project. I don't really like to do that kind of stuff.

With my own musical desires, I don't get stuck on too much or go and get too deep and obsessive on certain things. I'm putting in time and trying to get good stuff done, but not going so hard on trying to hit that roadblock feeling of "Oh, I've done too much to this." I usually try to avoid that now. You get pretty good at not getting to that point, and ditching the idea if it sucks, or making it work without killing yourself.

Why do you think collaborations have been such an important part of your creative process?

I guess it's hard for me—it's always hard for me. I've only done one real solo project and that was a while ago. Everything else has been with other people. I always felt like that was the more interesting way to do it. The process of collaboration can definitely be challenging, but it's the way that I prefer to work.

My circle has been kind of small in some ways—the people that I've actually worked with. It usually started out as friendship and bonding over the music as opposed to "I don't really know who you are and I don't really know anything about you, but I like your music and let's collaborate." It usually comes from more of a friend place and through people that I've known for years, and finally it's just like, "Oh, yeah, we should do something."

Has your relationship to producing and playing live changed since you got older?

Oh, yeah, totally. I haven't really performed live in a minute. I've cut back on a lot of live performances, been focusing more on studio stuff. I think I'm now equipped to diagnose a lot of the technical stuff better. It took years of troubleshooting in different live scenarios. When I first started playing out, I had a lot of steep learning curves and horrible moments and a lot of reasons to get anxious.

Having another person to collaborate with can be an encouragement and a way to absorb some of that anxiety. You can divvy up the labor. Sometimes it can double the stress. *[laughs]*

I always believed that live performance is naturally harder. I give a lot of props to people who go out and play live shows and bring gear out and do stuff to fit their own material.

Do you feel like you now have more of a level of control?

Yeah, a level of control and experimentation, and I'm always trying to develop new techniques, approaches, and templates. Different shortcuts and those kinds of things are easier to figure out if you don't really think about the live performance that much and just focus on the studio work.

There's always different problems to solve. I feel like the bar is slightly higher to try to make something interesting as a recorded document as opposed to a temporary live show, which, to me, is all in the moment. You can record good live shows, but I don't think most people play good live shows to try to make good live recordings. I think it just happens to be a bonus if you get a good recording of the live show.

Since moving to DC, I've admired the crazy amount of positivity and humor and optimism from guys like you, Aaron [Leitko, the other half of Protect-U], Andrew [Field-Pickering, of Future Times] and all the other people doing things in DC. How do you avoid becoming cynical?

I'll admit that I feel cynical on a personal level about various issues: political questions, political questions as it pertains to music, the politics of music.

That optimism that you might be picking up, I think, is due to the personalities of people involved. Andrew and I have been friends for a while, and got Future Times off the ground together. I always thought he was, and still is, a positive, hilarious person. That's the kind of person he is, so it translates pretty directly into his recorded output. It's probably me and Aaron less directly so, but more in the music itself, certainly with some aspects of the aesthetic and the presentation of it all.

I have my own view of the forces that are working against it, whether it's through the people who don't support the arts or creative outlets on some macro-society level. Those are things that I'm pretty cynical about. When you think about what's valued in society, what's allowed to flourish, and what kind of stuff is prevented from flourishing by external forces—if I think about those too much, I'll get depressed.

Hopefully it's rooted in people being good people, and I think it's certainly indicative of some cultures within DC having survived by not being super competitive with one another, each allowing different space for one another without any sort of complete dog-eat-dog mentality. It creates the sense that you don't really have to be an asshole. In other places, you might have to be more aggressive. Maybe we've just been fortunate enough to not have to have a lot of hurdles to doing stuff on our end, and that privilege allows you to be positive and optimistic. Other people may have to struggle more, and that might cause a different tendency and different artistic aesthetics.

I think we've been authentic in the way we've presented our stuff. I don't think image is super important when creating something that's like, "This is just human beings and we're doing our stuff and here's our music." That kind of simplicity—and maybe it sounds naïve—is pretty much based on who we are.

That approach also makes it easier to make a community because it's a lot less standoffish.

Yeah. I think everyone in DC has to be conscientious of their time and their energy and their material resources, and try to put those to good use. There's plenty to do here, and plenty to get involved in.

It's much easier to put your energy towards building something. I don't think that there's a whole lot of people in DC interested in being super negative and super shitty towards one another. I think that they just don't really survive. No one really wants to work with them in my experience. My world might be smaller than others.

I was reading an interview where you equated keeping up with a wide range of music with a sort of "academic" mindset—digging for records like a form of research. How much does the process of you making music involve the music you're listening to as much as the music you're making?

I don't know if I'd describe it in the same way anymore. I feel that article could have come from a period of time where I felt that my ability to have a grasp on new music seemed to be under control. I was digging records in the area a lot more then, as well as on the internet and Discogs and YouTube. I think now I know the stuff that I am interested in a lot more now, both as a musician and a producer.

My consumption of new stuff is a lot slower and I feel a lot less tapped in, but I think that's relative to the amount of stuff that's out there, which is a total blessing! The research is now in super microscopic ways relative to what I was thinking of research at the time of that article.

I think about the production of music a lot more than I probably have ever done. Working at a studio and working on engineering has made me much more aware of how things are constructed. I'd say that production is fueling and driving my interests in music right now rather than a new record that I may have just picked up, *per se*, which I totally dig and really listen to and obsess about in my own way. I feel it's not directly going into the same part of me that might be outputting something. It's an input, but it's compartmentalized in a different way.

We're obviously in the middle of an unprecedented upending of our routines right now because of the coronavirus. I've been curious how your creative approach has changed?

Personally, it might be too early for me to say. As an anecdote, we did one quick voiceover session at the studio before everything really changed. It was a really short voiceover session and it was horrible. No one wanted to touch anything. I was wearing gloves and wiping everything down to move the microphones around. I was depressed afterwards because people were so scared and freaked out... It was such a bummer. You can't really do good work in a studio if people are freaked. Especially if you're not used to being in the studio. It's going to cut back on a lot of people's ability to collaborate with one another. People need collaborators. They need people to be there for them and with them.

I spent a few days researching how remote recording sessions with people could be possible, thinking that we might have to do that at the studio. You can, but I don't think the tech is there to make it really easy for the other person. I just don't know if we're there yet where you can do that with human beings without being in close proximity to one another.

The technology of keeping in contact with people is fine but it's not a replacement. It's not going to quickly replace different communities and work environments and creative environments that people are used to working in. To go from that to what we're dealing with now, that's pretty harsh for the collective psyche.

It's making me doubt that it's going to be this awesome renaissance of creativity. I don't know how that affects me. I'm trying to do some mixing projects, and do some things of my own while I've been able to officially leave the house.

I just brought home a little drum machine from the studio to kind of play with but I usually don't have any sort of equipment at home. We have like a little apartment, so I don't have a set up here.

Now would be a perfect time to record a really paranoid album.

Yeah. it could, if you get the right kind of people and maybe that's their desired environment—the paranoia of this moment. When everyone's experienced something, how much can that really be transmitted? That'll be a question. Everyone's freaked.

You almost need some displacement or removal from something to feel some impact. Things hit a little harder if you can ask, "What was this like at this time and in this context?" It's this full-on context now! It's all real-time, making everyone feel "what the hell" constantly. I don't know if our art is going to be able to cut through that, but we'll see.

I appreciate the question of how it's impacting me. It's going to be an ongoing discussion and it'd be nice to have some sort of concrete thing that you can plan around at this point. But I feel like you just can't predict that now, so without that, I feel like a lot of people are floating around.

It'd be cool if there was collective self-improvement amongst people. If you're in a good position to help someone and help other people get through it, use this time to make good. That's the question a lot of people are facing—how to divvy up whatever they have versus whatever they can give, and try to give mutual aid.

Mike Petillo Recommends:

For history

For domesticity

For absurdity

For resiliency

For vulnerability

Name

Mike Petillo

Vocation

Musician, Producer, Audio Engineer, Studio Manager

Fact

courtesy of Mike Petillo

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