# On being willing to challenge yourself

Composer Tyler Bates discusses challenging yourself, conserving your emotional energy, and looking forward instead of back.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2802 words.

Tags: <u>Music</u>, <u>Film</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Time management</u>, <u>Mental health</u>, <u>Beginnings</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>.

**You play in bands, you score films, score video games. You've produced albums for other bands. Is there an artistic philosophy that you have that you can kind of apply to all of those different things?**

As I've ventured in life, I have had an initiative to really value the quality of the people that I spend my time working with, working for, hanging out with. And that's been a guide for me. As an artist, I think you need to create what it is that you want to do. Even as a film composer or a TV composer, you need to write music all the time—whether you're employed or not—and write the music that you want to relate to, at least at that point in your life, instead of just waiting to get tapped to do a gig and be some kind of jack of all trades.

Once I did *Dawn of the Dead* and *The Devil's Rejects* pretty close to one another, I got into doing a lot of dark ambient noise scores. But I also really love writing orchestral music and melodic music. You can get in this current of doing something other than exactly what you want to do sometimes, but that's why I do a lot of different things.

Say, for instance, that I was looking to satisfy all of my creativity through film scoring. It would be entirely unfair to any of the projects because that's just not possible for me. I love to play music with other musicians; I love to play guitar. I love to perform. All that stuff is a different dimension of what I do, and it's entirely up to me to work that stuff out so I don't bring in the overt desire or angst of *not* doing that into my film projects.

**How did you find your footing when you first started composing scores for film and TV?**

It took me a while to really join my natural style and talent with the music I was creating for movies. In my opinion, I did not do a very good job on those early movies. I mean, I did my work and took that very seriously, but stylistically, I just didn't understand that I have a certain skill set that I've really developed throughout my life up to a certain point.

Honestly, I probably should have just done more guitar-oriented scores the first few times out. It probably would've been better quality music. But nonetheless, I really did enjoy that experience of developing myself and finding a whole new world to focus my energy and my thought and the talent I had cultivated to that point in my life.

**I interviewed <u>Danny Elfman for TCI</u> as well, and his background is similar to yours in that he went from playing in bands to scoring films. He told me that when he started composing for movies, he received massive resistance from other composers who didn't want to see someone from a rock band in their world. Did you experience anything**

**like that?**

I think there has always been resistance to anybody new with a voice. Danny Elfman, I've met him only once. He was super cool and great—and thankfully very complimentary of some of my work. But before I even understood what the hell was going on with the film business, I was just doing these little movies out of my apartment studio with different players. I was working with one very high-ranking musician in the business who was kind of throwing shade on Danny Elfman. He said, "The guy doesn't even know how to read music." I just looked at him and said, "Well, then he's a genius." And that didn't occur to him until then.

Now, I know Danny Elfman has definitely educated himself. He's extremely well versed and he knows exactly what he's doing. But he was clearly intelligent enough and wise enough to find a way to do this relying on his natural strengths. I haven't read a ton about him, but I'm guessing that he sang a lot of his parts and figured out how to transcribe that or translate that to the orchestra and all of the necessary instrumentation to create the score. To me, that's genius, that's brilliant.

We can all go to school and study the works of John Williams and others who are amazing, but we're really looking backward when we do that. When a person's looking forward, they're just taking on challenges, trying to figure out how to achieve something that they've never done before.

And mind you, when Danny Elfman got into the business—same with me—there wasn't YouTube. There wasn't any information that was easily accessible. Who was teaching film composition? How many composers that actually had a viable career were teaching the craft? I have a tremendous amount of respect for all educators, but I'm just saying that this business is so challenging that you realize, over time, music is just a component of what the job is and what the career is.

**What do you mean by that?**

You have to be extremely tough mentally. You have to be very nonjudgmental of people. You need to set your emotions aside a lot of the time and just orient yourself to understand the people around you. When you're working with a director, you don't judge them. You understand what their storytelling is about. And the cool thing that has happened for me is because I began in bands and writing music for my bands and booking the gigs and promoting it all, I was always very, very focused and driven in that way. And then, as I got into films, at some point that took hold.

The other thing is, projects always overlap because the schedules never remain as ironclad as you might imagine they would be when they hire you. There's always something that pushes the schedule and that's why composers sometimes need some help. They thought they were going to do one movie, but if you're having success, everything's kind of slid on top of another and you're on three or four projects before you know it.

**You've collaborated with many rock-based musicians—Chelsea Wolfe and Jerry Cantrell come to mind. What do you like about that process?**

For me, it's always about understanding the person I'm with. When we judge other people, we're really using ourselves as the basis of comparison and we're all weird and fucked up anyway, so I really don't do that. But what this whole practice has helped me do is to more articulately express what a director is trying to accomplish through the musical dimension of storytelling and film and television.

Same thing with records. It's really about me understanding what these artists need, what they need to get out, and how they like to work. You can shout into the wall all day long about how this person's process is not efficient or professional or appropriate. That's not going to necessarily change much. You really have to just understand what's going on and find a way to tee people up to be the most creative—and potently creative—as possible.

What I'm saying is that the cross-pollination of things in my life now has become really vibrant and really interesting because I've been open-minded and still very driven and focused. So now, as a middle-aged dude, I'm

writing songs with all different artists now, producing records, producing songs. Touring with my friends like Jerry Cantrell, who is a very close friend of mine, and literally close because he lives across the street. We have so much fun playing together. That's just an absolutely awesome experience to have in life that I just wouldn't have had if I was only focused on one thing.

**Clearly, being open-minded has served you well.**

I haven't fallen into doing a ton of franchises. I've worked with several directors on at least four or five movies, which is really great, but I think I've done about 100 movies or something by now. But I am grateful that I've managed to keep my mind open about people. It goes back to: What do I want my life to be? Because when you're young, you're thinking—in an egotistical way, whether you're cognizant of that or not—of what you're going to do and be known for and all that. And I think that because I really placed an emphasis on the people that I wish to have in my life—the type of people—I've been working more and more toward what I want my life experience to be.

Because all this stuff doesn't even matter, anyway. Once we're dead, we're dead. Really, the idea of legacy is when you're living. And I very much cherish my relationships, personal and professional. And there's a certain experience I have, say, working with Jerry Cantrell, that there's just no other person, no other medium that I could have that type of experience with. And that factors into me understanding my own life more. To me, that's what's important. I could give a shit about awards. I really have never cared one bit.

**Judging by the sheer amount of films you've done in the last 10 to 15 years, you seem to work constantly. How do you deal with burnout?**

Dude…oh my God. It's a real battle. But I temper it by my involvement in so many different things. Touring gives me a different type of energy than scoring a movie, so I feel recharged. But by the beginning of 2020, I was burnt. Thankfully I was able to do this before COVID really became a thing, but I went to Costa Rica and spent the first month of the year there. And then obviously things got pretty crazy once I got back to L.A.

I also try to save my emotional energy for when it really counts. It's like if you react to everything that's happening around you… first off, you may miss the point. You may not hear or understand the necessary information that's required to succeed at your task—TV show, video game, movie, marriage—whatever it is. So it's really, really important not to be overtly reactionary. We're all human, so we have our days.

When you start to practice that, you're not necessarily trading blows with everything that happens to you in your life. Because if you're reacting to all the things that piss you off or scare you or upset you in any way, you're going to be exhausted. I mean, that's just like a constant fistfight in your mind and in your body. Because every time we process these reactionary thoughts, we have a physical reaction as well—and that can make you sick.

I've seen it happen to composers. I mean, this is a seriously stressful career. Any of us who are able to pay the bills doing it are certainly grateful for the opportunity, but it's extremely stressful. You're always feeling like your head is on the guillotine. So that's another thing. As you grow into your career and into your life, you have to have the presence of mind to know what environment you're in because you develop PTSD from doing this. And that's for real. So, as burnt out as you might get, there's also the concern you'll never get hired again. Every time we're done with a job, it's like, "Will I ever get another gig?" We all have that fear to some degree. You get used to a certain velocity that you're kind of damned if you do, damned if you don't.

So, it's a matter of trying to find a middle ground. And I find that because I do keep myself very busy, I try to temper my emotional responses to what's going on around me so that I can really just process what's happening. It does help me preserve my energy and my soul a little bit.

**I feel like I'm still learning how to do that. Every once in a while I catch myself reacting to something in a way that's not helpful.**

Oh, totally. We never master it, you know what I mean? It's just having the presence of mind to know that. For instance, if you're working with a very dysfunctional director or a director who's really emotional or…I've worked with some abusive directors. I have to be very much aware that that's their energy, that's their issue.

There's no reason to ever talk to somebody in a way that's disrespectful, even if you are upset with them or you're frustrated with them. I still work on this all the time, but it's definitely a meditation that I have running through my mind. I already know when I'm in a situation that's volatile, and it's very exhausting. So I need to be very, very sure that I don't react to it and do something that would be detrimental to the project and to myself.

We just have to really think about what we want, where do we want to be, what do we want the result of this action or this conversation or this day to be? Another thing for people at the beginning of their career is, when you get out of bed everyday, take just a second and consider the intent of your day. Instead of, "Oh my god, I've got to do this, I've got to do that, I've got to do this."

You just need to take a minute and think of the intent of your day. What are you setting out to accomplish? What are your priorities for the day? And this isn't just about work because your work will go to shit if you don't take care of your personal life, too. And if you've spoken to many film composers, you've spoken to many divorced film composers. Because managing your time and the stress is very, very difficult.

We just have to really be cognizant of this. And I'm still learning. When I was 30, I didn't know shit, and I missed a lot of family outings because my time management or my efficiency wasn't as good. I wasn't working as intelligently.

**How do you deal with writer's block?**

It's lame to say, "Well, there's this book," but I would only mention this book—*The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield—because it is a super-easy, fast read. And it really is written for artists and entrepreneurs. One of the concepts that he lays out is, it's a matter of us not brushing over the things that are important or giving ourselves excuses to not do the work that we don't want to do.

So, say you have writer's block. It's not going to help you really to sit in front of the TV. It might help you to go for a run or something like that, so you can just loosen up your mind. But really, you need to sit down and write. You may create total horseshit for two or three hours, but at some point you're going to have a breakthrough. You're probably creatively productive for what—five, six hours a day? And then the rest of your time is really cultivating whatever that creative idea is.

So, if you are persistent enough to have a breakthrough, you can work with that. Even if it's the end of the day and you're like, "Okay, I'm physically and mentally at the point of diminishing returns. I'm going to leave this for tomorrow." You now have that seed or that spark that can help take you to a fresh place. Also, if you play an instrument, learn a song that is of a style that you wouldn't normally play. Listen to stuff that you haven't heard before. And I'm talking about people who are creative, who are looking to open themselves up.

I think we just need to consider what our diet is. If you do this all the time, every day, you have the muscle as a creative person to create. You just have to be willing to challenge yourself and not write backwards. Like saying, "Well, this worked," or, "They liked this." You're going to fail when you do that. You have to continue to invent.

**Tyler Bates recommends:**

*The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield (book)

*Blonde OST* – Nick Cave and Warren Ellis (score)

*The Old Man* – T Bone Burnett & Patrick Warren (score)

*Come From Away* (Broadway musical)

*The Watcher* – Morgan Kibby & David Klotz (score)


<u>Name</u>
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<u>Vocation</u>
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□

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