

Daniel Rossen on how to be in a band



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2758 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Independence](#), [Anxiety](#), [Success](#), [Promotion](#).

Grizzly Bear has been a band for over 15 years now and you just released *Painted Ruins*, your 5th record. Is it funny to look back and try to trace the evolution of your work?

Yes, certainly if you go far enough back. I can start uncovering things I did when I was a teenager that are just cringe-worthy and it's that kind of reaction of, "Oh my god, what was I thinking?" When I hear things like *Yellow House* it feels like a time capsule, mostly. Recently I've been thinking more about the way how your brain chemistry changes as you get older and how it's not as easy to be as full-throttle enthusiastic about whatever ideas you're into at the moment as it was when we were younger. There's no substitute for naive enthusiasm. That was the mindset we had, especially while making something like *Yellow House*.

Back then we were really throwing ourselves into it. There was that youthful, full force, slightly idealistic way that you treat your own ideas. You give so much weight to them that at times it led us to make some decisions that maybe we would not make now. At the same time, we would push through to find some pretty crazy things that we'd probably shy away from now, things that maybe we *shouldn't* shy away from.

It's been interesting, later in life, just trying to find other ways to engage with what we're making. I wonder if it's almost like engaging different parts of your brain as you get older, different ways of thinking about what you're making. It's a little frustrating. The last few years it's been harder and harder to get excited about any idea. As you get older, finding that same kind of spark becomes increasingly difficult. I guess that's just how it is.

The way you absorb and process things just changes with your life experiences and as you mature. It's interesting to think about what that means in regards to creativity.

I wonder if it is something like that. I guess as you get older, you're engaging more of your frontal cortex or something. It's the experience of reading more and engaging more of your brain, not just the endorphin rush, emotional brain part of yourself.

Keeping a band together for over a decade is no small feat. Given that everyone in Grizzly Bear lives in different places now, how do you work? I'm assuming that technology must make it easier.

Right. I still do a lot of writing on my own. As far as the band, this time around we just approached it much more slowly. We used a Dropbox-like thing to send ideas around. We wanted to approach making a record by bringing in very open-ended ideas at the beginning and not really submitting anything even close to a finished song, at least not to begin with. I tried to avoid even submitting anything that had any lyrics or even my voice on it, just to slowly see where everyone was at and what they were interested in. We were all feeling out each other's taste since it had been so long since we made a record.

At the start of the process, we didn't really know if it was going to be a record. It was like, "Well, we should try and see." Since we've all been living apart for so long, it wasn't totally clear what we would do. With every record we've tried to open up the way we work together and try something different and make it a little more democratic in one way or another. This record was definitely an extension of that, where we were trying pretty hard to make every song a more collective experience.

On previous records, like the last one, in the beginning of the process a couple of different factions of the band brought very fully-finished songs to the table and they didn't all really jibe. It just fell apart for a while because it was almost like we were trying to make two different records. It was unnecessarily tense and I think this time around we wanted to avoid that as much as possible and try to find some common aesthetic. It was healthy for us, even if it sometimes felt a little less inspired or maybe a little clinical. It felt important to take things as slowly as possible and move forward together.

Creative dynamics within a group are both fascinating and complicated. When you are a writer or a painter, it's not as if you need to negotiate the aesthetics of what you are making/doing with several other people, but in a band there is the sense that everyone needs to be working towards the same goal, to share some common vision.

It's definitely a real struggle. You've got to be very good at compromise. Over time I think we've all learned to take all of our ideas a little less seriously and not just keep an open mind, but be mindful of the notion that your idea isn't necessarily the only idea or the best idea. There is something to be said for just throwing yourself all the way into something and taking your idea and pursuing it to the fullest degree. At the same time, there's also something totally amazing about the way other people can lead you towards a solution that is completely foreign to you. There's an amazing gift in that, too.

How do you avoid getting bogged down in the process and over-analyzing what you're doing?

I don't know. It's pretty hard. It's funny because writing alone can be a problem where it maybe doesn't feel like over-analysis, but it's more like you just get so tired of your own ideas that you shut them down. I do, anyway. Within a more collaborative context there can be this clinical part to dissecting things to the point where it feels like it sucks the life out of them. Sometimes that's what it needs though. Often I feel exhausted by the process and then we'll continue to push through and something ends up working. It's such a subjective thing.

I worry about basically taking an idea and turning it into something not as forceful or not as much its own self just because you're so worried about doing one move or another and not really seeing the larger picture of what's going on. There is always the danger of not seeing the larger picture of what's being expressed or just overthinking it. At the same time, what can feel overthought or overworked to me may not read that way at all to someone else. It's endlessly confusing to me because for years that's a conversation we have, where I'm like, "I don't want to muddle something too much." I feel like if I know something has been almost workshopped to death, you can hear it. I'll worry that people will hear it too... and they often don't. I'm almost always proven wrong in that regard. So, I don't know.

There are so many mental pitfalls you can fall prey to, especially when you've been a band for a long time. You want to innovate, but not alienate. You want to change the way you do things, but not destroy what people have come to love about you.

Just generally worrying at all about what anyone is expecting of you or what they like about you is almost certainly going to lead you in a weird direction. There are a lot of worries about repeating ourselves. If one of us submits something that feels too similar to another era of our own band, we'll generally be like, "Well we should do something contrary here to make it something else." Sometimes I think it's a great idea and sometimes I don't. I don't necessarily feel obligated to make something that sounds new every time or even at all, honestly. I don't know that I even think that's our strength. I think we have a unique sound but I don't know that the sound in and of itself is innovative in any way. If you have an idea that's somewhat similar or related to something you did a couple years ago, I don't necessarily see that there's anything wrong with just doing it anyway and not worrying about that at all. Just make good songs.

There's that notion that you're supposed to be somehow reinventing the wheel every time.

For sure. Some people are great at doing that. I think it's okay to be an artist that doesn't necessarily do that. You're not necessarily revolutionizing the medium or anything. Just do what you do and do it well. As long as there is a forcefulness in your ideas and they work, it's OK to just go with it. That's fine.

You also make records on your own outside of the band. How important is it for you to have some kind of creative life that's not connected to Grizzly Bear?

It's important. It's largely hypothetical these days since I've barely done anything of my own in a long time. I've tried for the last five years to get somewhere with these ideas I have but I've mostly been throwing everything away. Even though I've been finding it really difficult to finish anything on my own, I still think it is important. I feel like there's still some possibility and potential in some of the ways we used to write that I still want to pursue. I don't think it would necessarily be of interest to the band and that's okay. It feels healthy to have these things I can explore in my own music, even if it's hard for me sometimes. It was so refreshing to come back to the band because it's so much more gratifying to have other people to bounce ideas off of. It's amazing to have people to help you realize your ideas, and it's equally amazing to help other people get their ideas across. It's just so nice to be useful to other people. That's one of the best things about being in a band—to be a useful contributor to someone else's ideas is really gratifying.

There are pretty healthy gaps of time between most of Grizzly Bear's records. Do you find that it's important to stop and really go away for a while? Is it necessary to do that in order to keep going?

I think we all need a little bit of time to be in our own lives, for sure. After that last album cycle it seems like everyone in their own way ran in terror from music industry life. Something about the way our touring experience went, I can't really quite put my finger on it, but just sucked the joy out of it. Having some time away felt necessary. I was living upstate and being away from the culture of New York City and music culture in particular, having a complete break from all of it, allowed me to recalibrate towards having a simpler relationship to making music again. We always want to feel like we're doing this for some reason other than just we need to get on the road and make money, but sometimes you need to take a break to find that out.

I obviously am very grateful that we get to do this for a living but it's very hard to feel like you're making or writing anything of any value to anyone if you don't feel like you have a reason to do it. That was probably most of it for me—just needing a reason to do it or to not do it. Another thing, I think we're all open to *not* doing it, too. I definitely had long periods during our off time when I was like, "Maybe that's it. Maybe I'll just make music at home sometimes for the joy of it and that's it." And even that was a good feeling. Why should it be a given that we have this career? This isn't a given. We don't deserve this, necessarily. We're lucky to be in this position but you can't expect it to just happen or for people to always care. As with anything, you always need to pause and ask yourself, "Why?"

The "business" of being an artist is almost always complicated. How do you stay connected to the part of it that feels pure and honest and creative and also make a living?

I don't know, it's tough. I think just keeping in mind that you're really on your own. I feel like there should be a thread of ideas, a kind of feeling, that extends back to your very first days of trying to write songs or play music with other people. You're just trying to make something that you want to hear, that you enjoy, and it's entirely your own narrative. It doesn't have to be about yourself necessarily, but it's not about engaging with fashion or the music industry. It's about following the thread of your own ideas. You just have to always try and do that.

Some people are very good at engaging with all of the aspects of the music industry and doing self-promotion and all of that, and are still very good at maintaining that thread. I respect that. I don't think there's anything wrong with engaging with the music industry and the showboat aspects of being an entertainment figure. I've just never been very comfortable with that and I don't think I'm particularly good at it either. I have to just ignore it as much as I can and hope that as long as I'm following whatever thread of ideas, a theme of interest, or exploring ideas that seem like they're worth making, then things will be OK. If what we're doing doesn't work and it's not successful in the same way as something we did before, that has to be ok, too. It just has to be about making whatever it is you want to make.

I also know plenty of artists that are not particularly successful but they still keep making whatever they want. You have to have some other reason for doing it. I guess that's what we were saying earlier but I think that has to remain true for anybody. Keeping that as the focus feels like the only way to really insulate yourself from feeling like a clown.

Has your metric for success changed over the years?

I definitely didn't have any expectations of being a musician. I didn't write music until I was older, later in college. I played jazz and I studied classical music when I was a kid. I really loved it but I always thought of myself as more of an extreme appreciator of music, just a really avid listener, not as a musician. I came to making music from the perspective of someone that loves listening to it more than anything.

My first attempt at really making music was making hip hop beats. That's how I started making music, just taking bits of jazz records and things that I loved and making loops out of them on tape recorders and playing them for people. Out of that that I found my way towards actual songwriting. I like thinking about that continuum, the relationship between listening to things and appreciating them versus actually making them and realizing that there's not really a huge difference between those things.

You should be able to approach what you're making from the perspective of a listener. Instead of thinking about your ideas as "I'm trying to force an idea through and you're going to like it," it's more like, "I just want to be hearing this as if I'm a listener of any other music and hopefully it's something that works or resonates when other people hear it, too."

Essential Daniel Rossen:

Grizzly Bear - [Yellow House](#) (2006)

Department Of Eagles - [In Ear Park](#) (2008)

Grizzly Bear - [Veckatimest](#) (2009)

Grizzly Bear - [Shields](#) (2012)

Daniel Rossen - [Silent Hour/Golden Mile](#) (2012)

Grizzly Bear - [Painted Ruins](#) (2017)

Name

Daniel Rossen

Vocation

Musician

