

# Dave Hartley on how to balance your personal project with the one that pays the bills



October 30, 2017 - Philadelphia's Dave Hartley is best known for his supporting role as the bassist in The War on Drugs, the popular heartland rock band that just released its fourth album, A Deeper Understanding. Aside from the band's founder, Adam Granduciel, Hartley is the only member to appear on every album. But in his spare time, Hartley makes symphonic pop as Nightlands, a group he concedes may sell more tickets and records if it sounded more like The War on Drugs. But for Hartley, who released his fourth Nightlands album, I Can Feel the Night Around Me, in May, compensation is the least important reason for pursuing his own project.

As told to Grayson Haver Currin, 2257 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration, Beginnings, Process, First attempts, Multi-tasking, Success.

**You released the first album from your own project, Nightlands, two years after the first album by The War on Drugs. Did playing bass with that band inspire you to try something on your own?**

The story of my involvement in The War on Drugs is the story of musical maturation. I met Adam Granduciel when I was 25 or so. We both worked a shit job together at this property management company. We'd moved to Philadelphia around the same time for the same reasons. A lot of people leave home, go to college, and want to go somewhere new. You don't realize at the time that you're setting your life on a path, when you think you're just drifting.

I was in a ton of bands, and all those bands were, to varying degrees, trying to "make it." I had already been chewed up and spit out by trying to find success. But then I met Adam and Kurt Vile. One night, they were tweaking out on something, sprawled out on the floor, surrounded by pedals and cables and screaming into microphones through samplers. That sounds a little cliché now, because we've seen wave after wave of Animal Collective-influenced bands, but in 2005, when I was in all these skinny-jeans, Strokes-influenced bands, seeing this was a really powerful jolt. Adam asked me to play with him not long after that, and I said "Yes, totally." That became a journey and an education.

Seeing Adam and, to a different degree, Kurt have this strong-willed identity about what they liked and why they liked it empowered me to do something of my own. I had never written songs before. I had dabbled, but in the same way that anyone's ever picked up a guitar and felt shame with what they've come up with. I'd never done anything that represented any unique vision. But I bought a tape machine, and I got really passionate about method and trying to find joy and trying to subvert that shame loop that happens when you do something you don't like. Most people feel that when they're trying to create; they're already reacting to what they've created with a value judgement.

**That music was immediately different from what The War on Drugs was doing, it seems.**

It's been a blessing and a curse that my own musical identity is really different from this synthesized Americana of The War on Drugs. In some ways, I'm glad for that, because what I do doesn't neatly fit under The War on Drugs umbrella. But I probably would have sold more records if my albums sounded more like The War on Drugs.

**How did you initially balance those two different musical and leadership impulses?**

When the Drugs were on tour during one of our first tours in Europe, Adam and I both got laid off. We came home when the abbreviated Wagonwheel Blues album cycle ended. We weren't established at all at that point, so it wasn't like, "This next album cycle is going to pick up, and we'll do this again." It felt like an open-ended amount of time.

I really dug in. I was heavily experimenting and recording. I started to realize that maybe what I was doing was worth playing for other people. I had a few friends come over and played a little bit, but I was pretty much gauging their response. They were favorable. So I mixed and mastered and sequenced it before I let anyone outside of a circle of 10 friends hear it. I sent it to Ben Swanson at Secretly Canadian, who was the only person I wanted to hear it. A week later, he called and said, "We really like this. We want to put your record out." From the outside, it may not seem seismic, but to someone who was so hesitant to show anyone their music and was so unsure, it was a huge validation. Sometimes, all you need is a kick, and that confidence can go such a long way.

**Why did that validation matter so much to you at that moment?**

A big part of it was dislodging some fallacies about creativity and realizing that a lot of it is just labor and work—a lot of really unsexy qualities. You just need to try hard and focus. I don't think creativity is this divine spark. But you're raised that way, where music and writing and other forms of expression are portrayed as, "I'm just a vessel through which this shit flows." But, really, it's work ethic.

**It seems that deep work ethic is something that's intertwined with The War on Drugs, too, or at least with Adam's obsessive studio tendencies. Did that translate to your approach?**

With Adam, there are so many things I've learned, even though his process is so different. It feels more like obsession with him, because he's willing to go 16 hours in a row. But I do think a lot differently than Adam. I am always trying to get into a playful place. That's where my creativity flows from. I don't know if that would be the best characterization of the way he works. There's a different feeling. I'm always trying to go back to that place where you're not making judgements and you're just exploring. That was something else I had to come to terms with: You have to do it your own way. I like to work at 8 in the morning, to get up, make a shitload of coffee, and go. That's when my brain is at its best, when I'm fresh out of bed, with an empty stomach. That's my headspace.

**You've been doing both bands for nearly a decade or more now. How do you maintain the distinction, in terms of time and process and style and commitment?**

When the War on Drugs is kicking, it has a real totality in my life. I have today off, but I'm planning for a tour and practicing. It is a huge blessing that all The War on Drugs albums have taken two years, because we'll tour pretty heavily and then take a couple of years off. I spend the first year writing and recording and maybe doing a little touring on the Nightlands record that results from that.

I'm trying to resolve to keep more of a creative spark when I'm part of this War on Drugs team, though, which is what it feels like. I've never really been on a

sports team, but it feels like what I imagine that must be. You come together and form one thing and suppress certain parts of your personality just because you have to. You try to win, whatever that means in music. And then, when that is over, I immediately get hungry to create something and to express my own tastes a little bit.

**You love basketball. How do you define your different positions in the two bands, as a “player”?**

There’s no sports-basketball-analogy stone unturned for me. I never thought that The War on Drugs would become such a popular band. We were never trying to do this, and Adam was never trying to write music for anyone in particular, actually. This band was never trying to make it, and I think we did a lot of things that confounded the record labels and flew in the face of that. But somewhere along the way, the success of the band necessitated that I find a team where I could play the point guard or be the focal point of the offense. There’s a problem with this metaphor, because basketball teams are measured by wins and losses, and there’s no clear metric for music, no metric for expression. But I did want my own team, even if we were playing in the D-League. I just wanted to exercise that part of my brain.

This last Nightlands record, just because it came out right before the Drugs album cycle started picking up, I only did one short tour. A lot of the shows were sparsely attended, but it was the most spiritually enriching thing I’ve done. A big part of it was needing to have the ball in my hands. When I went back to my role as a facilitator with the Drugs, it made me feel like my ego had been satisfied. I could be a more loving bandmate and leave my ego at the door, so that I could play the songs and not shine anything on myself.

**Has that been an issue in the past, where the contributor role simple wasn’t satisfying?**

It’s not so much that I’m wishing to step forward. But the cog that I am in this Americana band is to be the bass player and to be the best bass player possible, whether than means something minimal or more. That’s a profound challenge. It’s not something I take lightly, and it’s something I take a lot of pride in. But I love to sing in harmony with a bunch of humans. Adam has warmed up to vocal harmonies in The War on Drugs, but it’s more of a Steven Van Zandt harmony. But there’s always going to be this other massive part of my brain that is wanting to make these little pocket symphonies. I’m lucky I get to do that.

**Do those two lifestyles support one another creatively? As in, does the time spent in The War on Drugs help feed Nightlands?**

I have really definite input-output cycles. Months will go by when I am voraciously reading and listening to music. Then, the life cycle shifts, and I’m not really interested in listening to music. I put the books down. I’m writing and creating and thinking. Instead of flowing in, it flows out. So, when we’re touring, it necessarily turns to input. We’re on an airplane or a bus all the time, and I’m listening to tons of stuff and reading a lot. That collects in your brain.

I always fear that I’m going to forget how to make something. The touring cycle just feels so long. When it’s over, you feel older. I’m always like, “Shit, what if I can’t create anything?” So far, it has always come back really fast. Storing things up does fuel that.

**When you return and find that you still have songs to write, is that reassuring?**

At least for me, it speaks to one of the greatest fallacies about creativity and composition: You can’t think it out. You have to do it. It’s something that happens, not something that can be planned on a spreadsheet. Sometimes, you sit and think, “What do I want my album to sound like? What do I want my songs to sound like?” You’ve just got to do it. Get in there, create, learn, and maybe write a bunch of shitty songs at first.

Sometimes I see people who are always writing all the time—the Prince methodology of writing and recording every waking moment. I used to hold myself up against that and say, “Man, why am I not like that?” Now, I give myself a lot more credit and self-care. I accept that I’m not like that and enjoying that I like to go to the beach or go on a run or binge-watch Seinfeld with my wife. Those are all things that I enjoy, and thinking about the health of your being as greater than the output you have is important.

#### DAVE HARTLEY’S FIVE INSTRUCTIONS FOR INSPIRATION:

##### Listen to good audiobooks

When the right book and narrator come together, it’s beautiful music. Check out Richard Poe’s reading of Blood Meridian or Will Patton’s Tree of Smoke. These guys sing the words. I’m not kidding. It’s taken my love of certain authors to a whole new level in the same way that Harry Nilsson elevated Randy Newman’s work for me.

##### Play pinball

It’s an analog video game and will guiltlessly addict you. It’s physical and tactile and each machine is a work of art. The design is so fucking cool, on both aesthetic and utilitarian levels. Also, it’s not as complicated as it looks: Aim for the flashing lights, and don’t hit both flippers at the same time.

##### Watch basketball

It’s the only sport I care about, because its greatest practitioners are masters of improvisation. Watch some Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Pete Maravich, or Michael Jordan highlight reels for evidence.

##### Listen to Dan Carlin’s Hardcore History podcast

So compelling and detailed. He spends months researching and preparing each episode, which can be as long as five or six hours each. His delivery is impeccable. I’d recommend Wrath of the Khans (a mega-series about Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire), The Celtic Holocaust (on Julius Caesar and his conquest of Gaul) or Death Throes of the Republic (on the collapse of the Roman Empire) to start, though they’re all great.

##### Get a flip phone

Do it. You know you want to. You can still text and call your friends and the battery lasts for like 10 days on a single charge. You’ll still have your laptop and you can get on WiFi if you want with your old smartphone (take the SIM card out), so you can still post a photo of your cat on Instagram. It will set you free in a small bit significant way.

#### Name

Dave Hartley

#### Vocation

Musician

#### Fact

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