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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2523 words.

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# Dean Wareham on knowing when to take a break

**You've been playing in bands—namely Galaxie 500 and Luna—for over three decades and Luna has been an active band for nearly 30 years. A couple of years ago you published a memoir, *Black Postcards*, that unpacks why and how it can be so hard to keep a band going. What was your take-away from writing that book? Did it clarify things for you?**

My take away from that experience was mostly that writing is difficult. It left me with a new respect for anyone who writes. Writing non-fiction, whether that's just writing a review or, in my case, writing about your own life... it was challenging. Trying to write clearly about real things, as opposed to writing cryptic lyrics or whatever, was a real puzzle to figure out. You want to express yourself clearly while also realizing that no matter what you write it's gonna make someone else angry. It's a brave activity.

I'm a slow writer, too. People will say "Why don't you write something else?" and I'm always like, "I don't know." It takes me a week to get started. I sit there, I write some long thing, and then it just gets shorter and shorter and shorter. I'm sure if I did this all the time I'd get better at it, but even now after having written a book, I don't think I'm there yet. For a long time when I was working on that book I dreaded sitting down—that was the hard thing, sitting down in the chair—but eventually I got to a point where I wanted to jump up in the morning and start working. I was thinking about it all the time.

**Luna just released an instrumental EP and an album of covers, but it's been 14 years since you released *Rendezvous*, your last proper album. That coincided with a documentary that chronicled the end of the band. It felt like the end. What made it not be?**

What made it not be the ending? Well, I think we got a nice, long, healthy break from each other. I think the 10 year anniversary of the band breaking up crept up on us, and then the 20th anniversary of [our album] *Penthouse*, and you start to think about things. Those numbers creep up, and they're in your head a little bit, and then people are always asking you about it. A Spanish promoter wrote, "I heard a rumor that Luna are getting back together, is that true?" And I was like, "No it's not true...but *maybe* it could be true." He made an offer for a tour, and it just seemed like that could be fun. We all get along. I had some trepidation about it, but at least we waited 10 years. 10 years is a long time.

**Are there things that you feel like you can do in the context of Luna that it wouldn't make sense to do just as a Dean Wareham record?**

Well, Luna is always going to sound like Luna. It's weird. It's about the way we sound when we're together, which is different than how we each play on our own. It's the four of us together that make up a certain sound. It's a sound that is pretty consistent.

We don't jump around from record to record, hiring some wildly different producer who is going to shake things up. We are never looking to jump on some new sound. I think we sound pretty similar now to how we did in 2004, or even 1995. But the dynamic in the band right now is different. We're older. We still get cranky with each other on the road, but I think we're able to step back, and be like, "Oh, okay, this is the part of the day where we're getting cranky." We don't take it personally.

**Band relationships are like any kind of relationship. You learn to let things slide, you learn that not every person's bad mood means that you have to break up, not every fight is necessarily "the end."**

That is very true. Looking back at the "end" of Luna in 2005 is very strange. When I watch the documentary of that time, *Tell Me Do You Miss Me*, it's a little uncomfortable because I'm watching myself go a little crazy. When you break up with someone you have to convince yourself that it's really intolerable and really awful. That's what you must convince yourself of in order to leave—you're building that story in your mind—so it's like watching myself do that. Looking back, maybe we should have just taken a break.

**The narrative also seemed to be, "We can't make money, there's no record label, this is too hard, we just need to stop."**

Certainly there was that pressure. People would always ask me, "Wouldn't you like to have a huge hit

record?" I was like, "It's not that I want to have a huge hit record, but the money would enable everyone to relax a little I guess." Yeah, that's 2004—the record business was collapsing. Well, people say the record business collapsed, but really it's a whole lot of different businesses collapsing simultaneously. Publishing was failing, and the compact disc business, which had been enormous, was also collapsing. So, that was changing everything. All of a sudden instead of selling 70,000 records, you were selling 15, and that was happening to everybody.

**It seemed like a break up at the time, but it seems like a nice long break was kind of what everyone needed. It seems like it was what needed to happen.**

Most definitely. The economics are still a challenge, but now everybody does something else as well, and I don't think the band is our entire lives, like it was back then. It can't be. You gotta do something else. It's hard to sell music right now, but there are benefits to the internet world. And I think it's always difficult being in a band. Of course there's some people getting super rich as rock stars, but most musicians are struggling, and always were. We're lucky we have something of a following anyway, so we can book some shows in Spain and get the word out, and get the music out there pretty easily, though getting paid for it is more difficult. We can go to places like Spain and play shows. Spain used to be a big market for us, now nobody buys anything there except concert tickets.

**Someone else told me the other day, "Thank God we have cool merch, because that's the only thing that's making us money."**

Someone else was recently saying to me, "Thank god for direct to fan sales." D2F, that's the big thing right now. The internet helps with that, too. You can connect directly and sell things, not through other streams or a store, but by going direct to the person. It has worked for us. As a result, I go to the post office every day to mail stuff out. I remember years and years ago when I was doing Galaxie 500, after the show finished I'd be counting the T-shirt money and having a crisis, like "Is this what we set out to do? Sell T-shirts?" But that is part of it.

**You have a long history with doing cover songs, including a new EP of covers. What is it about playing other people songs that you love so much?**

Well, for one thing it's easier, because you don't have to write them. Playing other people's songs is also a good way to learn how to write songs. I guess it's in your blood, you hear something, a song you really like, you can either cover it, or you can borrow from it or steal from it and do your own thing. A lot of the fun in doing covers is trying to figure them out. We've done some covers that haven't worked, like we did Led Zeppelin once, "Dancing Days." It was a little funny to hear me do something to Robert Plant. I just kind of talked my way through it.

**Do you find that your way of working—either your way of writing music, thinking about writing music, or what it means to write a song—has changed dramatically over the years? Or has the process become more calcified in a way, in terms of how you like to work?**

Well, I guess it varies from song to song. For a lot of the songs I do, I'll do a chord progression of some other song, where I'm like, "That's really great I'm going to take that and slow it down really drastically or speed it up, or change the key or something, and just start playing around with it, or singing on top of it." By the time I'm finished with it, there's really very little resemblance to the original. That's one way. Sometimes it's just from sitting and practicing, having some ideas pop into your head.

I think I work harder on the lyrics now than I used to. We've been doing this thing where I'm selling signed lyric sheets. So, I'm sitting there writing out the lyrics to a lot of my old songs, and some of them I'm happy with, and some of them I'm like...maybe I should have thought about that more, that is a lazy, lazy line. I think I'm pushing myself a little harder now. If I go all the way back to the first Galaxie 500 record, I mean, for every song on that record there's only one verse. I sing the verse and then I repeat it for the second verse, and that's it. Not a lot of words at all, but it works, like "Tugboat" is just one or two lines repeated over, and over again, but it works.

**It's a funny thing about lyrics. I feel like it's unfair to judge them outside the context of the song.**

You're right. I shouldn't look at them on the page, because you can't compare lyrics to poetry, even though people do compare lyrics to poetry all the time. For example, is Bob Dylan a poet? Does he deserve the Nobel prize? Perhaps what they meant when they said, "He's a poet," is just "He's really good" since poetry is on a higher plain, and it's just a different thing. Obviously writing songs, you get help from the music. The music can help make people cry, whereas the words wouldn't do much to them on their own... but then you put them together.

**Will Luna make another full length record of original Luna songs?**

I don't know. We're not planning on it, but we'll see where we're at. I feel like as you get older, there's no huge rush. I think maybe people benefit from slowing down a little. You don't have to make a record every year, or even every two years. We used to have to do that, because we had a seven album contract. It's not that we had to, but there was a guarantee in it for us. It was like, "Okay we've finished touring, and we're out of money, so we better quickly write and record another record, so that we can get paid." It gets you working, but maybe it's better to wait until you're really ready. Certainly with Luna there were times I think we went into the studio too quickly.

**Maybe it's better to wait until you feel like you have something to say?**

I saw Geoff Dyer do a reading in Brooklyn. He was talking about writer's block. They don't really talk about writer's block much in England, it seems to be a particularly American thing. It's this idea that I'm sitting here, I'm ready to write, but I'm blocked, as if it's a medical condition that you could see the doctor about. In reality, maybe it just means that you don't have anything to say, so go away and come back, go away and read a book.

I don't have a good writing routine. I don't get up every day and do that. But maybe next year I'll start to feel the pressure to write more songs. I haven't written many songs since I came to Los Angeles. Britta and I did a soundtrack, and we've done these covers, and the instrumentals, but I don't know, it's so sunny outside, it's hard to write. Raymond Chandler did it, surely I can, too.

**What makes something feel successful? How do you measure artistic success?**

I don't know. I guess it's a judgment you make yourself when you've finished with your record. Some songs work, some don't. What I'm looking for in a song is maybe just one moment; it doesn't have to be all the way through, but a moment where something unexpected happens, or some moment that makes you feel a certain way. Sometimes you get there, and sometimes you don't. That's okay too. You know, not every song has to be amazing, at least not to me.

I'm someone who's able to finish things, to finish a record, and then stop and put it away, and say, "Okay that's it, we've done that, we spent several days doing this, and now it's done." I guess I don't have as much patience as some do for going back and tweaking, and tweaking, and tweaking things. Not that I'm right, but I guess maybe that comes from the early days, from the first records I made with Kramer producing. We were not given that option, so it's like, "Ok, next, that's done. Move on." I like that.

#### DEAN WAREHAM RECOMMENDS

1. I don't read a lot of poetry but I keep a copy of John Betjeman's Collected Poems on the bedside table and last year came across this documentary: Branch Line Railway from 1963, the year I was born, it follows Betjeman as he rhapsodizes about the English Railway system.
2. Brian Calvin's paintings are hard to look away from. He had a show at the Anton Kern gallery in New York last September. Apparently we met at Galaxie 500's show at Kennel Club in San Francisco in 1990.
3. The ignorance and noise all around us is depressing, especially when it comes to American foreign policy. A good corrective would be Eric Hobsbawm's The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991—eye-opening history of the short 20th century from the late great British Marxist historian.
4. The Trypes: I saw this band at Danceteria in the mid-'80s. The Trypes contained several members of the Feelies, they recorded a lone EP in 1984 but 30 years later an expanded collection Music For Neighbors was released.
5. I recently played a show with Nashville-born guitarist William Tyler and have since spent a lot of time listening to his deftly titled instrumental album, Modern Country.

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Writer, Actor

Fact



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