Greg Fox on doing things on your own

October 2, 2017 - Greg Fox is a New York City born drummer, multidisciplinary artist, and teacher. He has played on and released 49 records since 2008, including his work with Liturgy, ZS, Ben Frost, Colin Stetson, Skeletons, Hieroglyphic Being, Man Forever, and others, as well as with his own solo work and his projects GDFX and Guardian Alien. Fox has toured worldwide with various groups and collaborations, held residencies at The Clocktower NYC and Pioneer Works (where he's a a part-time Music Director) and was awarded "Best Drummer in NYC" by the *Village Voice* in 2011. On his new solo album, *The Gradual Progression*, he uses a hybridized electroacoustic drum setup to "trigger tonal palettes, or virtual instruments invented for each piece." Here he discusses the logistics of touring as a solo artist, learning from failed collaborations, and the struggle of dealing with the uncreative parts of a creative life.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2719 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Focus, Collaboration, Independence, Adversity.

You do a lot of solo work, and also collaborate. How do you find a good collaborator, and what draws you to collaborating with people?

The best thing about collaboration is what you learn. Your way of approaching things changes because you absorb a little bit from the person you're meeting. Over the years, I've learned more about what makes a good collaborator: It's not just being a good musician, or even being a good listener, it's empathy and patience. Those are the kinds of things that end up going the distance. It's like puzzle pieces in a certain way. Things fit on different sides of you in different ways, and it all adds up to something. This is not just about playing music with people either. It's about every possible collaboration you can have.

Have some potential collaborations looked good on paper but fallen flat in reality?

For sure. I've been brought into hired-gun situations that looked incredible on paper, but were complete disasters. When it's a true collaboration, the actual music tends to be cool. I haven't had a lot of situations where on paper, a collaboration looks cool, and then you get together and it falls flat artistically or creatively.

If a collaboration *does* fail, you have to ask: How much of this is me and how much of this is the other person? That's how I've dealt with the one's that were difficult, or that ultimately didn't work. Those were the kinds of things that caused me to ask questions about myself, to start to figure out what's going on there, and what are the things that are causing me to react to certain things in certain ways… without there being an objective right or wrong. It's led to a lot of personal growth.

Are there benefits to doing things on your own?

There are a lot of benefits. The way I'm doing my music now [on a sensory drum kit] doesn't feel like I'm completely alone, even though it's all me. I built it in a way that makes it unpredictable. Every note I play isn't something I'm predicting—things happen that I then respond to. It feels different to me than when I'm doing a solo modular synth set, or when I'm playing acoustic drums by myself.

Being solo is more logistical in some ways. It has less to do with the actual show then everything surrounding the show. You're only responsible for yourself. I've been a touring musician for 10 years now. Most of it's with

bands. Even in the most harmonious circumstances, it becomes a little grating at a point. To just be surrounded by the same people for long period of time—it's close quarters, and you never get time alone. Maybe it's just a contrast for me, because I'm so used to the former, but now that I get to do this thing where I've been alone, it's a huge relief. I feel like I have more breathing room, and like I get tired more slowly.

You have a lot of projects. How do you avoid burnout? Do you ever reach a point where you're just like, "I need to take a break?"

I think I avoid burnout by doing different things. It's not the physicality of drumming; that's never something that feels exhausting to me. It's the situations themselves. Kind of like the need to do pushups outside of that van—it's that feeling. Or, the other thing, is the psychic or mental exhaustion. The feeling of like, "I don't know what's going on in here anymore."'

Moving the headspace from one thing to another thing helps me keep moving. It becomes easier once you go away from something to go back into it. Like, with books. I'm not really a one-book-at-a-time person. Sometimes I'll stop feeling like I'm enjoying a book, that I overall am enjoying, and I go look around somewhere else and then go back. I think that's how I avoid the burnout. It keeps this wheel spinning. It doesn't feel like it's back and forth. It more feels like coming back to something, and it's different when I come back to it.

The thing that burns me out, aside from the actual energy spent doing the things, is the energy spent keeping organized. I'm starting to reach a limit with email and managing eight million calendars and every different booking agent. Every different person's manager. It's such a pain. I'm almost crying just talking about it right now. It affects me emotionally. I feel like it steals my time and energy in a way that I don't like. At the same time, I don't know how to be present in all the things I want to do, and not engage to some degree with that world.

Part of me thinks maybe just doing things a year at a time. Giving things more time. Being a part-time Music Director at an art's non-profit, and then being in a bunch of different bands, and then doing a solo project, multiple solo projects… It's not just about me and the potential to mess up my own stuff; there's all this potential to fuck other people over if I make a mistake. That's why it's so stressful. I've done that, I've made that mistake. I don't want to cancel shows. I don't want to blame other people if something goes wrong. I'm trying to figure that out.

There are people who I've worked with over the years, who've had managers or assistants. For a minute, I had management, as an extension of Liturgy. I was giving them a little extra to help me deal with other shit. I've seen other people do it, and it seems like it helps. But I can't fucking figure out how to give other people that work. And then I would either feel like they would be pissed off because I wasn't giving them what they wanted to be able to do it, and I would be pissed off because I felt like they weren't doing what I wanted them to do. I don't know how to do that. Sometimes I think it would be amazing to have some kind of assistant, but I don't want it to be a real person.

Whenever I feel like the juice isn't there, I go to something else. I don't know if this is a universal thing, but something I feel within social situations: Sometimes I feel like all my neurotransmitters are completely depleted and I can't really interact. You get to a point where there's no ammo anymore. But if you go to something else, you realize, "Oh shit, there's a lot here." If I'm lost in terms of figuring out something on my solo work, I can go from that to the modular synth, and start messing around with that and immediately I get something. That's a very giving situation.

The benefit of being a solo artist is it's easier to tour. But you're the only guy on stage. If you're in a band, people need to focus on this other stuff. If it's just you, all the eyes are on you. Does that give you any anxiety?

There's a big part of me that wants to be the center of attention, but also *not* the center of attention at the same time. Drumming is this perfect thing. You're not really looking at me, you're looking at something else.

I know I’m a good drummer. I know that I can sit with a snare drum and do a show that people are compelled by. It’s almost like a switch. I get behind the thing, and I’m doing this. My grandpa’s a drummer. I feel like, in some way, I’m fulfilling something by just doing this. I’m not getting into magic, or whatever, but there’s something about it that justifies itself. I don’t have to ask the question too deeply of, “Why does anybody really care about this?”

Sometimes I do feel a little awkward talking to the crowd, but for the most part, I feel pretty good being on stage alone. I like that every note that gets played is mine. There are things I miss about the collaborative aspect, but right now I’m really just enjoying it.

When I first started playing in bands, there was nothing about it that had anything to do with attention. Or anybody being paid attention to. It was just about playing music. It was purely this joyous thing of jamming. That felt so good. That was the only thing that mattered about it. It wasn’t about girls, or anything. It was really just playing.

Then, being in bands, you start to play shows. And people start talking to you about you being on the stage. Like, “You were the best thing on the stage,” or whatever. Then you start to get this consciousness about it, that I’d never had, and that was not a part of it. When it starts to get real—when press is involved—people get jealous. The first big band I was ever in, which was going to be amazing, was destroyed by it. I definitely developed a crazy sense of awareness about it after that. I want to enjoy playing. As a solo artist, I’m not dealing with any that. It’s not a factor. There’s no competition.

How do you go about making music these days?

For the music I’m making as Greg Fox, I start with a sound. That sound is either one that I make on the modular synth, and then record, and then cut and keep, or something that I record with a field recorder on the street. Or, a friend playing a note on an instrument, or something. Then I’ll try to blindly—or with as much randomization as possible—find another sound that compliments it. I have all these files on my computer—I’ve saved every different kind of instrumental sound, ambient sound. Stuff I’ve recorded. Stuff I’ve pirated. Foley, racks, and sounds of birds. Nature sounds.

I’m just spinning the globe and pointing. I’ll start with one and then I’ll randomly pick the next one, and see if I can make them work together. I keep doing that. While I’m doing that, because of the way sensory percussion works, I’m also building architecture for the way those sounds will behave, based on how I interact with them on the drum set. As I’m building these sorts of branching sounds, it’s like programming. As I’m building behaviors, for each thing, and adding to it, it starts to be this tree that grows out. I’m looking at the tree, and then if I’m drumming, I’m climbing it.

Do you find that teaching drums is helpful in figuring out what you’re doing?

Teaching’s been the most rewarding thing I’ve been doing over the past couple of years. In some ways, it’s like explaining the things I understand to myself, but in front of another person. I feel like if I understand what I’m saying, the other person will also. It is not always the case. When you try to articulate some of these things that you otherwise never would. A lot of the way I learned was people showing me things, and explaining them to me. But then the only way it ever works with drumming, or anything kinetic, is you have to then go spend time doing it.

Is there something that led you to drumming versus a career in visual art?

It was mostly that I was touring before I graduated college, and that kept going. I joined Teeth Mountain in 2007, and immediately went on a two month tour. Very shortly after that, I toured in Europe, and joined Dan Deacon’s band, and it became this thing I was doing all the time. And I loved it. Touring made a huge imprint on me back then, because I was touring in big groups of people. I had no personal responsibility. I wasn’t paying rent anywhere. I would just crash at friends’ houses when I came home. Part of me was like, “Okay, maybe I should just keep doing this all the time.”

No door ever presented itself that was like “pursue art.” That door never opened. Or maybe I wasn’t looking for it. But the music door was wide open. Also, in high school, I was in my room supposedly doing my homework, but playing bass with my headphones on instead, I was like, “I’m fucking up.” But in other ways, I was like, “But if I keep doing this, maybe…”

I was always thinking about music. I always made art. In college, taking art classes was kind of a fluke. I did it because I was going to be a Sociology major, and the professor was like, “What are you doing? You’re an artist, you should be making art.”

At Bard, they had this thing called Integrated Arts, which was a type of major. If you had enough credits in multiple art mediums you could combine them into a major and do your Senior Thesis as a combined art project. I wanted to do music, but I didn’t want to do music theory. I figured, if I did Studio Art, I could get enough Studio Art credit to match with my performing music stuff and my jazz history classes, and that I could do an Integrated Arts program. I did that. Once you get Integrated Arts, they stop paying attention. Your advisors check in every once a while and tell you what they think.

I got to this place where all I had to do is make all the music and art I wanted. My thesis was: I’m going to do an art show where I show all of the work I’m making, and I’m going to play with all my bands. My professors were like, “A+.” Then I got in the van. I threw the cap in the air, and before it landed, I was touring the US.

Five things Greg Fox does when not drumming

Play video games: That’s my main non-drumming thing. It’s worked for me, since I was really young. Sometimes, while I’m doing it, I question what I’m doing with my time, and I think this is pretty questionable. It’s also not cool, necessarily. My perception is that gamers, in general, are almost like vapers. There’s a whole vibe that’s kind of bro-y that I don’t like. I’m playing the new Zelda right now. It’s amazingly beautiful. Zelda for me has a nostalgic quality, too. I feel like I’m doing more than just playing a video game. I feel like I’m engaging with this mythology.

Read: I could up the reading, honestly. I’ve read like four books this year. That’s it. You fall asleep. I almost read to fall asleep, which is a shame. I go through spurts. I would like to get better at it.

Exercise: You can’t be answering emails when you’re doing yoga. The other thing is getting to a point where you remind yourself of the right now. I’m walking from my car to this interview. I’m not going to check my phone. The smaller moments, where I can remember to be a human and think about my breathing a little and notice things that are happening around me, really actually add up. You just need to pay attention to it.

Visit family: I spend a lot of time with my family. I get a lot out of that. I find that to be incredibly restorative. My sister had a baby—just seeing that. My folks, for the most part live in New York City, so I see them. That stuff helps a lot.

Eat: Every year I get one more thing that I cook. Right now I’m really into buying a whole maitake mushroom, and just cooking the whole thing and making that. Love that. It’s pretty simple, olive oil. I wish I was more of a cook. I like going to restaurants a lot. I like eating with friends. That’s a huge one.

Name
Greg Fox

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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