

Ian Svenonius on what he's learned from rock and roll



March 7, 2017 - Ian Svenonius is an American musician, writer, and occasional talk show host. He is famous for fronting a variety of beloved rock bands from Washington, D.C., including Nation of Ulysses, The Make-Up, Weird War, and Chain and The Gang. Between his numerous projects, Svenonius has released more than 19 full-length albums and more than 20 singles and EPs. Svenonius has also published several books, including *Supernatural Strategies for Making a Rock 'n' Roll Group and Censorship Now!*

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2227 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Anxiety](#), [Identity](#).

Are you someone who works better creatively within the context of a group?

I do. I love it. I love being in bands. I sometimes think it's almost arbitrary how a person expresses themselves, as long as they do it. It's very much contingent on the circumstance of their time. The artists on the left bank in Paris at the turn of the century were working in the medium of oils because that's what people valued at the time and that's what people were paying attention to. Those people might've expressed themselves with music 50 or 60 years later or in some other way. The way that expression would come out might be really different.

For me—for my generation—it was rock and roll because rock and roll was the only thing that was affordable and accessible to us. I was going to art school and immediately was I like, "Well, the thing that I'm involved in, music, has the most energy and excitement right now." Nobody was getting famous, nobody was being compensated in any way, but there was this incredible enthusiasm by the participants. Whereas the art thing felt very moribund and the only enthusiasm was institutional. That's changed a lot because now the arts are everything, but I'm talking about a different era when music was like, "Oh, this is the truth." That's where you wanted to direct your energy.

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Some say rock 'n' roll is this dumb teenage expression akin to pornography or comic books. Historically, it was kind of garbage. It was eventually only made respectable because the British loved it. It could be anything anybody wanted it to be. At the root of it, there's this idea that rock 'n' roll is this stupid teenage pornography, but every time somebody wants to invoke authenticity or reality, it's gonna be irrational, kind of stupid, and carnal. It's gonna be that thing, the original rock 'n' roll thing. It's perverse. It's perverse music. If you feel like you need to say something and you wanna make music, go make rock music. It's easy and you don't have to be that good at it. In fact, usually the stupider it is, the better.

You make lots of music with lots of different people. Do you ever feel stuck? Or is music this inexhaustible well that you can always draw from?

I think it's infinite. Also, it's just endlessly fun. Also, people don't really care about the music I make. I get more positive response from the things I write, but the thing I love to do is make music and perform. That's what I really enjoy. I just love music and I love performing, more than anything. Everyone should do it.

Part of that is it's just fun to invent and create. It's not about originality. It's not about finding something new. It's

kinda like talking. To be honest, music isn't usually very good when it's trying hard to be original. It's like cooking. Cooking isn't good when it's original. Now these chefs are like artists and they're supposed to be, "Oh, well it's so genius when he puts saffron in the ice cream, it's so incredible that he put rosemary in the caramel." That's not what good food is typically. Trying too hard just dilutes the flavor, you know?

You don't really want music to be desperately original. You want it to feel like it has a particular personality. That's really what you want, or at least that's what I want. I know it's not the same for everyone. When I look at, say, what's on Pitchfork, it seems like they don't care about personality. They just seem to have different values than I do. I realize it's all very subjective, but when I hear a lot of modern indie rock, I just have to think "Well, they don't have the same values that I have." What I'm looking for is personality. It doesn't matter to me if it's like, "Oh, wow, they're using a crazy time signature in that song." Who cares? Is it fun?

There's also this idea that every record is supposed to be a classic that you're supposed to be able to play a hundred times and blah blah blah, but that's not really the way most records were made. When I buy old records from the '60s, they were almost like magazines. It's like here's an idea, and it's okay if you'd only listen to the record once. Most TV shows or movies you would only ever watch once. You rarely watch a movie twice. I think there's this idea now that every record has got to be this *thing*, like it's the end of the world, and it needs to be the greatest thing ever. I think it's really unfair to the records—and to the people making them—for that to be an expectation. It's really like, no, the records should be fun to listen to. That's enough. I buy lots of records and I listen to once and I feel like that's fine. It's fine. It's \$12 and I listen to it once. That's cool. If you are trying to make things and you are operating under the idea that everything needs to be a classic... well, good luck. That's the kind of thing that will keep you frozen forever. Don't think about that.

You are a multi-tasker: recording with a variety of bands, writing books, DJing, playing shows. How do you manage to juggle all of that stuff? And are there things you'd like to do that you haven't yet?

I don't think about it too much. I would love to make a record with a full orchestra. I also want to make a new TV show at some point, maybe something like the talk show thing I did for VICE. I'd love to make some movies. It's hard, you know? Stuff is hard. Once again, you just adapt and work according to what the situation provides. Sometimes you have an idea that's like, "Oh, that would be cool," but is it really something you're going to want to live with?

For example, sometimes you see a band or you hear about a band with some crazy gimmick, like a novelty band. You're like, "Well, that seems like an idea somebody had as a joke, and now these people are stuck living through it." You know what I mean? Not to say that that's any less legitimate than anything I do, it's just weird. It's more of a choice. Do you really want to live through that? Everything takes a lot of time. If you're going to do something well, it's going to take a lot of time. I'm not saying I do everything well, but I'm realistic about what I commit myself to and how I spend my time. You have to think about that.

Music is something that generally takes a really long time because, in addition to writing and recording, you also have to go physically embody the performance. I'll spend a year touring and I'll sometimes come home and think, "I have nothing to show for this year except for this experience." In a way, we can look at the things we've released or the things that we put out there physically as our markers. I know that's a primitive way to think, but you really do feel like that's kind of what you're hanging your hat on. If it's just performance performance performance, it can feel a little, "Oh, what have I been doing?" Performance is repetition, ultimately. You're just repeating things you've already done.

So the records—the creative markers—are important, even if you don't necessarily wanna be overly precious about it.

I think this is very important. It's supposed to be like, "Oh, the record's the music and the record cover is just this whatever." That makes sense to a certain point, but ultimately, people are going to *look* at the record more than they actually *listen* to it. That's the fact. Especially now, because everyone's forced to sell their own wares. I tell young people in bands now that back in the '90s we didn't really sell the records at our shows. They were just like, "Whoa, who sold them? How did that work?" And I'm like, "There were record stores. That's where you sold your records. When you were playing a show, you were just playing a show." People can't even believe it. They're just like, "No fuckin' way!" As if it's inconceivable that there was a time when your livelihood wasn't your actual merch.

The point is that you really have to look at your record all the fuckin' time now. It's sitting on that table—your merchandise table—and it's always with you and it's got to look good. You've got to feel good about the record every time you look at it. It's fine if it sounds terrible, because nobody's really going to listen to it, but it's got to look good. [laughs] This is my honest, practical advice.

You wrote a book called *Supernatural Strategies for Making a Rock 'n' Roll Group*. Is there such a thing? For young bands now, so much of the narrative seems to just be about doom—the music industry is dead, there is no money, the onus is YOU to sell yourself to the world.

Every time I happen to look at Instagram there's some new person that I've never heard of before and they have a record coming out and apparently there are billions of fans. I have no idea. I resent this world that we're living in where we're all on the same level thanks to the democratization of literally everything. I just hate democracy. I like the underground. I like the fact that there used to be distinctions and different themes and scenes for what you were into—like you were into metal or you were a punk or whatever.

Now everything's the same. It was supposed to be so great that we all had the same platform as Madonna, but I don't have a thousand people working for me like Madonna or Beyoncé. Ultimately, the democratization of everything has created a situation where we're all being crushed by the bigger brands. It's the opposite of what it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be this great thing. You get the same publicity, but there's no actual dividend. I can't help but think it was better when people were slaving away, when it was essentially a hobby. People played shows and made things for their own pleasure, not for "likes" or to generate traffic or any of that kind of shit. Now we're all expected to play at the same Jammin' Java.

As someone who became well-known as part of a very specific culture and scene, do you worry that because of the internet it feels like "scenes" become obsolete—like everything becomes one thing?

Yes. Now even independent people are all genuflecting toward these superstars who are total bullshit. They make garbage. They really make garbage. These people shouldn't be validated. They shouldn't even be acknowledged. I don't ever want to think about Kid Rock, but somehow in this world I have to consider him a peer because we both technically make music? But now we're all in the same world, this is the same big boat. We're all the creatives. It's so gross. There's no intrinsic values to a scene, or even aesthetic parameters, now that everybody can just be part of anything. I think you should ignore that stuff. Resist. Get off the internet when you can. Go outside. Embrace your own personality. Make what you want. Ignore everything. Do shit with your friends. Have fun.

Again, personality and just being an interesting individual can really take you a long way. I'm often in situations where people are like, "Oh, yeah, you're *that* person." It's like if you're at a party and William Faulkner walked in and everybody's like, "Oh, my God, that's William Faulkner!" but nobody in the room has read any of his books or knew anything about him, but they're just like, "Oh wow, William Faulkner is here." "I'm such a big fan of you, Mr. Faulkner. I just love that you exist!" It's weird. I feel that way sometimes. People know me as a person who makes things, even if they don't always know what I make, which I guess is fine. I'll keep making things, regardless.

Recommended by Ian Svenonius:

5 or 6 things I refer to when I've lost the plot

1. Modern Lovers - [Precise Modern Lovers Order](#)
2. James Brown - [Live at the Apollo Pt II](#)
3. Brigitte Fontaine & Areski- [Je Ne Connais Pas Cet Homme](#)
4. Luis Bunuel - [The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie](#)
5. J L Godard - [La Chinoise](#)
6. [Eat the Document](#) - Bob Dylan & D.A. Pennebaker

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Vocation

Musician, Writer

Fact

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Jen Dessinger