On creative liberation

Actor, writer, and musician Carlos Dengler reflects on his life after Interpol, the value of going back to school, and the creative liberation that comes with shedding your old personas and exploring new ones.

October 7, 2019 -

As told to Camilo Garzón, 3039 words.

Tags: Music, Theater, Writing, Success, Inspiration, Process, Beginnings, Education, Creative anxiety.

How did your upbringing influence your creativity?

Growing up in Queens in the ’80s, and then moving to suburban Trenton, New Jersey in the early ’90s, had a huge impact. I felt a lot of compression growing up in New York. I didn’t have the survival skills that you needed back then to feel at peace. And so I was beat up a lot. I was made fun of a lot. I was very much bullied growing up there. And that created a lot of fear and anger, which I felt was fuel for my music listening. It really made me get into heavy metal.

And then, moving to New Jersey, all that went away very quickly. All of a sudden I had a car. People were cool to me because they were like, “Oh this guy’s from New York. So, what’s his story?” Instead of me being the one that was bullied, I was now the new kid that people were inquiring about. I just felt more welcome. There was more grass. I could run into the woods. I had more privacy. I had a lot more space. It introduced me to new ways of being, and it softened me, in a way. Being in this other environment, I felt a little bit more free to ask bigger questions.

Then you went to NYU and got into philosophy, this discipline that is, in a sense, the mother of all disciplines. How did philosophical thinking end up influencing your creative projects from then on?

If you’re really into philosophy, you’re really interested in getting to the root of everything. Not everyone is so sympathetic to that idea. But if you happen to be somebody who feels that the quest is very important, then there’s so much in philosophy to bite into. I had a sense of much more possibility for what I could pursue with it. And I’m just grateful that it gave me an ability to navigate around a much more uncertain plan.

For a while I was like, “I’m going to go to graduate school. I’m going to be a philosophy professor.” But by the time I graduated, everything that I came to NYU believing about myself pretty much got shattered. What actually ended up happening was something much more crazy and random, yet so much more glorious than probably what I would have encountered if I had actually just stuck to that original plan. Interpol took off, and that changed everything.

As a co-founder of Interpol you ended up contributing 25 percent of its cultural DNA from 1997 to 2010. It’s still one of the longest creative projects that you’ve been a part of. If Fugazi is one of the ways that D.C. sounds like, then New York kinda sounds like Interpol. I’m not trying to get into details, especially as you’re writing your memoir and it will involve an account of what went down…

Yeah. Absolutely.

But the important thing is that you did *decide to leave* Interpol. And that's a very important decision that shows a glimpse of a more interesting story to come. What was it that prompted you to leave? And why is it okay to leave a project and also create some kind of distance, and a rupture, with a previous version of who you were?

I think the key is in using the word rupture, because that was my default strategy. It's something that certainly worked wonders for me as a younger man. I have a particular phobia or an allergy to being boxed in and being categorized. It feels like death to me. I think many artists are comfortable with the categories that are assigned to them throughout their lives. So long as they're able to pursue their one passion. Sometimes I envy them. But that whole idea is utterly foreign to me. I'm much more anxious as a person. I'm much more unsure about whatever I'm involved in. I tend to look at things as happening to me, or as things being too circumstantial to be believed as being an essential component of me. As I enter middle age and beyond, I'm beginning to realize that the technique of rupturing things may not serve me so well with a less nimble body and a more wizened soul, but it was something that was very necessary for me back then.

Like what you described very well in one of your essays: "On Specialization." You're not a bassist only. Or a keyboardist, or a composer, or a DJ. Others might perceive that. That was one of the things you gave to the world. But you contain multitudes.

Yeah. As I get older, this sort of tendency of mine gets more and more confirmed for me, and I realize that this is my identity. I agree with the adage that to be a jack-of-all-trades is to be a master of none, but I also find it to be incomplete. Because I feel like there's one exception to that rule. You can't be a master of any of those trades, but you can be a master of being a jack-of-all-trades. And so, that's kind of how I see myself. I aspire to have a beginner's mentality and a sense of process around everything that I do. The freedom to do that is what's imperative to me. Before, it happened through these ruptures, and leaving Interpol, of course, is a big example of that kind of abrupt shift.

The pop rock world is not exactly a place that fosters this. It's not really inside the way they do things. I think the record companies just believe that bands will be bands, boys will be boys, and let's keep throwing money at them and opportunities, and maybe they will just keep going and going. And that works for some bands, but it certainly didn't work for us, because I couldn't get with the program. I'm not saying that my former bandmates were also like that, but they were much more comfortable with this idea than I was. And I think I would have needed either to have taken over—and then it wouldn't have been Interpol, it would have been Carlos Dengler—or I would have had to miserably follow a paradigm that was utterly foreign to me. And in both of those cases, there's nothing but unhappiness.

And so, I feel fortunate saying that for some time I had the privilege to experience things and give things back to the world while I was in Interpol. Very few days go by where I don't think that and say, "Wow, I can't believe that that's what I did in my mid-20s to my mid-30s." Like, that's pretty fucking incredible. I still say the same thing about what I've been doing in the last 10 years as well, but it's a completely different thing.

That kind of understanding of yourself is good. Because you did decide to venture into a kind of "diaspora of artistic pursuits." If you were to look back at that decision, how do you feel about it?

I'm going to be frank. It's not easy.

Many times during the day, it is a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. And then I just have to take a step back and remind myself that I was headed in a direction where today, as a 45-year-old man, if I had still been doing that, it would have been tantamount to a literal prison of the soul. I wonder if I would still be alive. So, I have to always express gratitude for what happened—no matter how hard it is today, it's always a victory and it's always a feeling that by leaving I did the right thing. But it's difficult.

Working on this memoir has been an extremely rewarding experience. It's the one thing that I feel crystallizes perfectly what this phase in my life is. And that it's not about material success, it's not about followers on Instagram, it's not about status, and it's not about wealth or influence even. It's a completely different investigation of life.

There’s nothing like a memoir to be a vessel that can contain that experience. It can serve as a foundational text for all the other things that I want to do. And it’s still going to take a while to finish. But sometimes I get kind of antsy and I’m like, “Ugh, I don’t feel like I’m moving forward or anything.” Even if it feels like I’m trudging through molasses, or like nothing is moving, or like nobody is seeing me… All that doesn’t matter. Because even if a paragraph is all that I did today, it’s all about getting that down onto paper.

That makes sense. It’s also important to remind oneself that this is your pace and that the only person that could write this book is you. The memoir is, in fact, your way of accounting for what happened to you…

Yeah. I read Nabokov’s memoir, which is just an incredible book.

***Speak, Memory*. Yeah.**

That book is just mind-blowing. I love the part where he says that these memories that he has, that he needs to kill them, because they’re just oppressing him. And the only way to kill them, to be rid of them, is to put them down on paper and then finally that thing that happened to me in my life is now over, because I put it down onto paper.

Let’s get into other kinds of writing. You wrote an essay on Henry Rollins, a sketch on ghosts and dreams, and a piece on what it means to you to think about Interpol’s debut album, *Turn on the Bright Lights*, 15 years on. What has been your approach and process on writing these?

The great thing about writing is that it’s so simple. You just need a pen and paper. You can write a journal entry, and then that is it. Unlike acting or filmmaking, there’s no production or post-production. And writing for me has always been a lonely path.

Another thing is that you can’t get every audition, right? You can’t even get into every room. And you can’t book every gig. So, when you’re facing that wall, and when other things are going on, writing is the one thing I come back to… And writing about all these things, the really complicated feelings that would come up, caused me a lot of anger and a lot of distress. But then the more I did it, the less I would feel those things. I would start to see that that was an indicator of just how much is in there. I’ve always felt like I can go back to these things and there’s treasure waiting for me. So writing is a way for me to just go on a dig for gold.

When you created your one-man show, *Homo Sapiens Interruptus*, it was a blend of accounting some of your experiences, not just with writing and music, but also in your role as a raconteur. Is there a type of art that took precedent in its creation? What do you think was your impetus for acting and performing this kind of hybrid between a monologue and a stage play?

It’s hard to even compare them but I love music, acting, and writing equally. I’m a classically-trained actor now, and I graduated from NYU the second time [with an MFA in Acting from the Tisch School of the Arts] in 2015. Getting an MFA as a 42-year-old man is a completely different story than doing it as a 32-year-old man. So my impetus for *Homo Sapiens Interruptus* was that it is a hybrid between my memoir and my acting work. I’m a big fan of Mike Daisey and Spalding Gray, and these are two performers who sit at a desk and don’t move. And yet you feel like, “Okay, well, I did go see some theater today,” and it makes you…

Feel transported.

Yeah. Exactly. You still feel transported even though nothing happened except some person was sitting behind a desk talking to you all night. And it really makes you ask yourself, “Well, then, what is theater? What is the base, the essence of the theatrical experience?” It’s storytelling, right?

It really replicates that feeling, which is ancient, of sitting around a fire and listening to the town elders tell stories of the hunts from yesteryear. And it’s a way for the tribe to keep reinventing itself throughout the generations. It’s this oral tradition, and it happens together. You get this sense of community that you can’t

get from just sitting down and reading a book. So, it is this feeling that I really needed, even if just for myself, to construct the new persona that I was kind of showing to the world. So, up until then, as far as Google and Wikipedia were concerned, I was Carlos D, the bass player of Interpol.

But now it was 2015 and I had gone through years of training, years of therapy, years of recovery. And all these new things about myself had been coming up. What to do with that raw material when it comes time to working on your craft? Well, I sat at a desk and performed a monologue, talking about my past and merging it with greater ideas. And it was a way for me to broadcast what the new kind of ingredients are, and the new way that I'm living. All that I cared about was making that first step of saying, "This is who I am today, right now."

It seems to be a matter of not only self-distance, but it's also aesthetic distance. Maybe you were also creating this persona so that, in a sense, you're also kind of killing it on paper as well. I am here, this is me right now, and this is who I was.

Absolutely. And anybody who goes into therapy can benefit from this sort of thing. Because the moment that you start telling your story, and a pair of ears is across the room listening to it, you've already taken that first step in terms of distancing yourself from the oppression of being known as that person. Being that persona, being famous and being adulated for those things, is very similar to being addicted to something, right? The way that it lies to you. The way that it whispers in your ear, and makes you believe things that really aren't true. You can stop doing the drug, but it's already infected you, so you do have to do work on yourself if you want to go and contribute positively to the world. And so, I had to do a lot of that stuff. Doing one-person shows is just one part of that puzzle.

In a sense, leaving these personas behind has liberated you. Not only personally, but also creatively. Do you think that *Iowa*—the short film that you have been working on as the director, starring actor, composer, writer, and overall creator—is a good synthesis which provides a template that you can follow from now on?

Yes, I feel that filmmaking is the grand prize of all art. I feel like it's sort of… do you know the term Gesamtkunstwerk? It's a German term that means total-work-of-art. And Wagner's operas in the 19th century were kind of like the largest pieces of art. They had everything in them. Cinema is a powerful medium for that reason. I feel like it can capture just about everything that I'm interested in. Visual stuff, writing, acting, storytelling. It's all there. And to me, if I had to pick and do one thing for the rest of my life, I would do that. I would just make films for the rest of my life.

What would you say has been the most surprising thing that you have been realizing with the process of creating *Iowa*?

The thing that most surprises me is the extent to which the things that work best in art are often the accidental things. The path of least resistance is usually the most effective path. So the stuff that we labor over, the stuff that we just keep trying to make work, and the things that we push for, like our agenda, our desires and all that, in my opinion, will never work. All your ideas will fail compared to the stuff that you don't control. The stuff that just issues out of your being.

In Interpol you could say that that was happening by virtue of the fact that not one person was writing the songs, so not one person could push their agenda. And therefore it formed, for a very brief moment, a natural corrective on narcissistic impulses. It kind of created something holy or sacred. It's so much more difficult when you're the auteur working alone. Because then there's no one to hold you back in indulging your excesses and luxuriating in your own kind of narcissistic self-congratulatory gestures.

Which is why it's very important when you are working on something that requires you to be by yourself that there is always someone else around. Like an editor of some sort that's going to look at what you've written or done, and tell you no, this is not working. I feel like something that I definitely appreciated from working on *Iowa*, and which I hope to hold onto as best as I can, is to just keep checking that ego. And keep checking those impulses. Because if you let things speak through you and communicate through you this way, that's usually where the best work is.

Carlos Dengler recommends:

Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*

The Ezra Klein Show (Podcast)

Burroughs Range Trail (Wilderness travel route in the Catskill Mountains)

"Symphony No. 5," by Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich

Vinyasa Yoga

Name
Carlos Dengler

Vocation
Actor, Musician, Writer, Memoirist, Composer, and Filmmaker

Photograph by Linda Covello, courtesy of the artist