

On learning to trust yourself

Wilco frontman and author Jeff Tweedy on why ego can be useful, demystifying process, vulnerability, and the importance of disappearing in your work.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2206 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Success](#).

You've often said the ultimate goal of making something is to disappear. What does this feel like in the moment?

I can't describe it particularly well. I've tried a bunch of times in the book. What I guess the book is trying to explain is the things that I do to try and get to that state.

Are you aware when it's happening?

Not necessarily. There are times where it vacillates in you. If you have some solitude you can toggle back and forth between being a little bit aware of your surroundings, a little bit aware of what you just put down on the page, and sort of take note of it and go, "Oh, I really love that," or something. But those are conscious thoughts that are taking you out of what I'm talking about, you know?

I feel like everybody does know what I'm talking about. Everybody experiences it—sometimes it's putting together a jigsaw puzzle or some other task. People really enjoy that feeling of being occupied, but not necessarily present. I'm basically trying to describe a way to do that so it produces something as opposed to just being a time suck.

Can you get to that place more regularly now?

I just have faith that it's there. I trust that it's there. I don't necessarily have to have faith that I'm going to love everything that happens through that process. And that's beside the point. The more I ask of it, the less sure I am that it's going to work. That's why I think people get superstitious about it because they want so much from it. They want to make something great. I have aspirations, I have ambition. I have those feelings, but I also have learned, or sort of innately have valued the actual process to a degree where I've written so many songs, so much stuff is already out there. Over the years I've had to really assess what is the part that's most sustaining for me. It hasn't been any one of those songs. It hasn't been any one of the finished things. It's been this place I get to go to, and this thing I get to do that helps me cope with the world.

You come more from the "just get to work" than the "wait for lightning to strike" camp of songwriting. How have you built the stamina to maintain creative habits?

I can't keep up with myself to be honest. I tend to make more stuff than I'll ever be able to finish. That makes me happy. What I feel like needs to be challenged is the tendency for a lot of artists to say that they're just like a conduit, they attach mysticism and some sort of magic to songwriting.

That makes people think there's something prohibitively special about certain people, but not them. I disagree

with that. I think it's a way to make the artists feel more special than they really are and that they have a more unique set of skills than they really do. There's no doubt that there are different aptitudes for language and music and all of those things, but the part that is the creation, that is the inspiration. It shouldn't be muddled up with anything other than just the notion that you were born with it. Everybody's born with a certain amount of ability to improvise, or we wouldn't know how to find our way back home when we get lost.

Does your physical environment impact your output?

The Loft has developed over decades to be an extension of my creative drive and my desire to create and facilitate that feeling that I want to make things. I want to have a new song to sing. I want to get excited by something that wasn't there. It's become really important and has certainly become a huge part of my workflow and my ability to finish creations. But a very similar amount of actual raw material gets created and has been for a long time, even before I had this place.

Do you set an agenda of any kind when you go to write? Or are you carrying it all in your head?

I don't demand that I've broken new ground every day or ever. Finishing a record doesn't have to be just drudge work, like the dotting the I's and crossing the T's. I try not to look at it like that ever. I look at it as another opportunity to make something I wasn't entirely expecting.

What do you do when you're feeling stuck?

The breaks that we take in the studio are a lot of times listening to other people's music, watching some stupid comedy videos on YouTube or something on the computer, just giving your ears a break. If I'm stuck on something, sometimes I get the urge to listen to other things I've done that I'm not working on, like go back through the pile of voice memos and find another song I just totally forgot about and be reminded that it's there, even if I keep working on the thing that's sort of frustrating me at the moment. There are a lot of ways to work your way through those situations.

Sharing your process can be powerful for beginners and seasoned songwriters alike. Who modeled that for you early on?

With most of my heroes growing up, it was not penetrable at all. The idea of what they did, how they did it, how they even found the gear that they found...so many things seemed completely inaccessible to me. Down to the clothes. We were growing up in Belleville and were like, "Where do you get boots like that? I have no idea." A lot of artists that are on social media are a little bit more open about it. I think of people like Alan Sparhawk of Low who shares his chord voicing and does little tutorials.

There seems to be more of a collective spirit of a shared purpose for a lot of people. The internet opened up a lot of amateurism to an audience that wouldn't have been there for them, which I think is very good. Now you don't just have superstars, you have people that look like they're at your level to measure yourself against. People are kind of encouraging. There's a lot of fucking terrible reactions and discouraging stuff, too, but for the most part, if they put something out there they get something from it. They get something from their friends, they get some nice feedback. Sometimes it's mean, but for the most part, people still feel compelled to do it. That's really hopeful to me.

Educators often speak to the importance of a student being able to see themselves in a piece of literature or part of the curriculum. This is true for art as well. Looking back, can you see yourself in previous albums?

I have grown into a body and shape and sense of bodily self that more fits who I felt I was when I was younger. I never felt like a cool guy. I look at pictures of a younger me say in Uncle Tupelo or something like that. Like, "Oh, that was a cool guy. He looks like a rock star, he's skinny and has a precision bass," or whatever. I missed it while it was happening. I always felt a little less than. That's what was appealing about punk rock bands and bands like the Minutemen and a lot of groups that I saw that just felt like normal guys.

People don't need to go out of their way to find a middle-aged white man to respond to and see themselves reflected in it, but they might have to go out of their way to see a middle-aged white man who's allowing himself to be vulnerable and allowing himself to say, "Art is saving my life and it's beautiful." That's the only place I feel I could come close to having any influence.

That vulnerability can be particularly important for young men.

For sure. It's a reality of most people's inner being that there's a lot of doubt and a lot of negative self-reassessment going on constantly. It's unhealthy. It's unhealthy for the culture and for society to teach people not to be introspective or reflective on a notion of improvement or finding a lifestyle. We sell lifestyle brands, we don't really advocate for healthy lifestyles that aren't attached to products and things like that. It always has to be monetized.

You've previously shared that your sons have grown up in a culture of belief. They had multiple examples of people leading creative lifestyles. Did you have that same access?

No, but I found then the smaller rock music became, the more human-scaled it was. Going to smaller clubs and punk rock and independent music and things like that, the more within reach it felt to me. It changed my life in a very, very positive way. Without all of that I would have always been looking at it through a TV screen, or feeling like it was from another planet, that type of life.

I'd imagine your memoir required a high level of introspection. How did writing *How to Write One Song* compare?

I tried to point out different things I've learned, I guess that's a way of illustrating how my process has changed, but there's been a consistency to the way I've created. The main thing that has changed is my ability to observe how it works and do it on purpose. In the past sometimes I did it with drugs, sometimes I did it by accident. Now I have a clear idea of what is actually happening and I love it. I facilitate, nurture and protect this idea of myself as a creative person. As an inspired person, I try to protect my ability to be inspired.

To be vulnerable with you for a moment, your song "What Light" has been some of the most important creative advice I've held onto.

Thank you so much. I'm sure that some of that advice has been around forever. It didn't come to me through the universe, because it was in my subconscious, probably from some book I read, some other artist. It's just perennial good advice that you don't have any control over a lot of things.

Part of the new book touches on ego. Our society talks a lot about ridding yourself of ego. When can it have a positive impact?

Well, I wouldn't be here without ego. We tend to have suspicions of ego. That's warranted, especially in the creative process, that's where I try and emphasize that it doesn't help you make good decisions.

It's always looking for this idealized version of something to support your own narrative. That inhibits having something more real, vulnerable, and truthful from coming out. But the ego is great. I mean, it's incredible. Without it you would never have the confidence to share these things that you discover and talk about them and love for yourself and be good at loving yourself or be better at growing. Depending on what you base your ego on, it can be good or bad. If you base your ego on some good stuff, like the idea of myself as a good person, as a creative person and can keep feeding that part of it, that's good.

How do you know when a song has moved too far from its initial potential?

It just takes patience. Sometimes you get lost in putting some overdub on something or lost in enhancing something and it can be enticing, because you start to think about the new part and the new part can be incredible. It can be one of the best things you've ever done. The best, most inventive style of playing you've

ever gotten to. And still, I try and trust the nagging impulse to listen to it again, without it, to go back one step and go back one step all the time in the studio. It's pretty clear usually that what you've added doesn't make it better. It's also pretty clear when you miss it. You miss the thing that you just did so much so that you can't listen to it without it anymore.

That's the test of keeping it and moving forward. We say it all the time in the studio, "It's not better. It was better." It was better before. We just spent four hours doing this thing, but god, it's still great the way it was. That always makes me feel great. It makes me feel good to get rid of something that didn't make it better.

Jeff Tweedy Recommends:

Le Ren - "Love Can't Be the Only Reason to Stay"

Night Flight - streaming

Finding a Wood Frog in the yard. Naming him Brent.

Elegant Farmer Apple Pie

Discovering a distant ancestor named "Fountain Tweedy" through my wife's fascination with our family tree.

Name

Jeff Tweedy

Vocation

Musician, author, and producer

□

Sammy Tweedy