

On removing the wall between artist and listener



Musician and writer Ned Russin (Title Fight, Glitterer) discusses looking at songs objectively, knowing why you write the way you do, and confronting yourself and others through music.

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As told to Danielle Chelosky, 2520 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Politics](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

I read that you started recording this record while quarantining after touring Europe at the beginning of COVID, so I want to ask about what that was like.

I was on tour in Europe in March of last year, and obviously COVID was a big topic of conversation at that time. But it felt like it was something that was under control and something that would be handled and that wouldn't impact everybody's daily lives. So we were going about our business assuming that those things were true and that everything would be fine.

I was on tour with Turnstile. I was riding in their van with them and we played a show in Glasgow. And that night is when Trump announced the travel ban that basically every country in Europe besides the UK, would not be allowed. Any citizens from this country wouldn't be allowed to enter the US. And so obviously we're in Europe and that was concerning and so we had to figure out how to get home.

The last couple of shows of the tour got canceled, but we ended up playing two shows after that actually, and then we flew home. And then that was the last show I played. That was the last time I did really anything and that went straight into recording for me, basically.

I had already planned on recording at that point. I was actually supposed to start recording in Paris. After that tour, I was going to stay a couple of days by myself and record with a friend over there. So I already was in the mindset that I was going to start recording. So I just started doing that by myself at my house in the practice space in my garage, and so just started the process slowly and just took the next two months or so to do that.

It was a weird time, obviously. I mean, it's still a weird time, but that was the beginning stages of figuring out just how to even interact with other people even in the grocery store and digital spaces and in work settings. And it's like all these things were so new and so confusing, and so I gave myself a while to work on a record, which is something that I don't normally do. I had to figure out all that stuff and process all those emotions, while trying to make a record and be objective and allow myself to be a creative and hard on myself at the same time to make it good and all those things happening at once is not a good recipe.

The time after I finished recording got even weirder and I think everybody was going through it. It's not exclusive to me but it was just a really difficult beginning to what was supposed to be a good, exciting, interesting year.

What did it feel like to release the record and not be able to immediately tour on it?

It didn't feel real in a way. To me, I don't want to say the point of playing music is to play live but that is my biggest concern. Music becomes real when you share it with people in a physical space. That's when the songs actually take shape, when you see how people interact with them, how it makes them feel in real time and that's the thing that I care about the most. That's the thing that I am interested in the most. That's what I want to do.

Playing music live is my goal, and so not being able to do that has been weird because it just feels like, okay, the record is out. But all that means is it is able to be listened on people's phones at midnight on the day it came out. And if people ordered the record, it'll be in their mailbox on that day and stuff like that.

It feels like the songs aren't fully realized yet, but at the same time, I'm happy for the songs to be released. I'm happy that people have something to listen to because I think that that's important. So I don't want to short that, but it's a yes, as a person who cares a lot about the actual live aspect of it it was a strange feeling.

I wanted to ask specifically about the song 'How a Song Should Go' for many reasons, but especially in the context of you loving to make music, mostly for the live aspect.

When that song was written and recorded, this wasn't what I thought would be happening, obviously. That song didn't have a big thought process behind it. I like to write lyrics as subconsciously as I can and music for that matter, but I try to allow myself to wander and catch up to it and then analyze what's on, figure out what I want to say and then really hammer things down.

That song started to come about and I started to run with it. I've written lyrics about writing songs before, and I think in other people's music I really enjoy when I hear people reference writing songs for some reason and discussing songs in that matter.

It felt like it could have just been a passing reference, but I kept running with it. It wasn't a feeling of being completely dissatisfied with what I was doing or what was going on or what I've done in the past or anything. It just felt like an expression of how I was feeling in that moment of being frustrated and stuck in a creative place.

I think due to a lot of the external pressures—because I was locked in the basement because of what was going on—it felt like I was really unable to listen to the songs objectively as I was trying to. I think a lot of that frustration came out in that song. And then also as I sat back and analyzed it, tried to look at it in terms of the entire record of the bigger picture, I was able to refine it and think of it in a way that actually worked with the themes and the ideas in the whole record. It just seemed to work in a way that connected a lot of dots that I wasn't even intending to connect at that point.

When you try to look at your songs objectively—how can you try to achieve that?

I mean, I don't know if I'm very good at it, but I think for me there is a natural flow to music. And when I say that, what I think I really mean is that specifically in Western popular music, there are very specific places that music and melody can go. They're pretty predetermined. Given one note in a specific scale, in a specific mode and specific everything, you can only go so many places.

And so when I'm writing, the goal is to follow the logical conclusion of the notes. When I'm trying to listen to something objectively, a lot of the time it feels like trying to make sure the logic is intact. Because in the past I feel like I've written some songs and I've had these ideas and at the time they felt right. And then as I've played them live and as that version of the song came to life, I realized things that I wish I had changed because that was when the logic became apparent to me.

It's about trying to not think of the song as a songwriter, but think of the song as a listener and think about where does the song feel like it's going and try and pin that down. I think just given the context of writing

music in this culture and even further down the line in this subculture of whatever, underground punk, whatever you want to call it...I don't have a word for it, but there are only so many decisions that you can make and so you just have to make sure that you're making the right decisions I feel like.

Do you think that songs being short is a good decision for the logic?

Yeah, I do. I think at the beginning of the band it was something that I was very conscious of. It was a decision that I made for several reasons but it was one that I felt comfortable in, and then as I continued to write songs I felt like I was going a little bit beyond that.

And I'd write something and then I'd feel like I had this fully realized idea and everything is working and it feels like there's a good flow to the song. I would just feel I had a complete idea and then I'm like, "Okay, this song has to be two and a half minutes now, I think. There's multiple parts to it, everything is working. There's an intro, whatever, it's all there and then record it and it would be a minute and a half.

It just felt that was the natural length that I was going towards. I didn't try to get away from it, but I tried to not be completely stuck to that and it just keep coming back. I don't shy away from it at this point, it just feels like when I get to those moments that the song is over and I don't want to keep it going. I'd rather somebody say that they wished the song was longer than they wished the song was shorter.

I want to return to that idea of you liking songs that mention songs, because that's interesting to me as someone who's a writer. I hear a lot of people say that they don't like pieces of writing because it mentions being a writer and they say that it's pretentious and just stating the obvious. So I want to ask why you like songs that mention songs.

I think when I first heard it I thought it was super clever because I get what you're saying about writing, about writing being pretentious. And I think a lot of that comes from not writing about writing but writing about the writer. And I think in songs it feels like a little bit different for some reason and I don't know why.

When I first heard it, it just wasn't acknowledgement of the medium. And I was like, "That's really cool because like, yeah, this is a song and you're right. I'm listening to it and you are acknowledging that I'm listening to it." And I thought that was interesting. It didn't feel like an exercise in ego, it felt like an appreciation of the art form. And then after it wasn't a new and interesting thing to me anymore.

Ian MacKaye does it a lot. He does it in Egg Hunt and Embrace and it's just all over the place for him. And those things, it doesn't feel like it's this grand gesture, it feels like a vulnerable moment. It feels like the way that I interpret the lyrics of those songs. It feels like he has to do that. It's like the feeling behind the song is so important that he has to put it into a song to discuss it, and he's just acknowledging that he's doing that.

And so, I don't know, there was something about that that pulled me in and there's something that when it's done right it has a nice ring to it. It has a nice musical quality to just the words behind it, on top of there being that interesting analytical reading behind it but it's just something that I found that I enjoy. I thought about why I enjoy it, but really just the first time I heard it I just thought it sounded cool.

Do you think it brings an equality between the singer and the listener and breaks down the wall between them?

Yeah a little, but at the same time I think the way that I listen to music and the way that I think about music and the way that I write music is that it doesn't really have a wall to begin with. And I think that's coming from hardcore and just not really thinking that that kind of stuff is out of reach to begin with.

Maybe that is something, maybe because the stakes feel lower and the things that I'm referring to it doesn't feel pretentious. Because I mean, in thinking about people writing about writing and thinking about meta-fiction and people acknowledging the rules in the tropes of fiction in a story, those things are trying to acknowledge the

arbitrariness of something, while also trying to dismantle it in a certain way I feel like. Whereas in when I'm thinking about it in these musical terms, in hardcore you're ideally existing in a system that is already dismantled. It's already an ecosystem that is outside of mainstream. And so I think because of that and it successfully just dodges those questions. To me that's how I feel about it, but maybe I'm just biased because I like it because the barrier is non-existent I don't think about it in those terms.

I think I've always associated Glitterer with not having that wall in between the listener and the singer. And I think a big part of that is because of so many of the lyrics being questions. Do you see that as being a part of that or connected to it in any way?

I haven't thought of it in terms of the questions, but I see what you're saying. It involves the listener in a way, because it brings you into the song, I guess. When I asked the question, I guess if you're singing along that means that you were also asking the question of yourself. That wasn't intentional but that sounds good, I'll take it.

I think the setup of the band makes it that way also, which is what I like about it. Because there's only me playing I think it makes the lyrics fit a different context. And I think that again, I guess, to return to the idea of making music real, I think that's when you can analyze the lyrics at best. Because in the context of being the only person on a stage performing that, it makes the lyrics feel a little different than when they're just coming through a set of speakers and you're listening to it passively. To me, it's a confrontational idea that's supposed to be welcoming, it just takes the getting over the awkwardness of it.

Ned Russin Recommends:

Loudermilk by Lucy Ives

The Shame by Makenna Goodman

Telephone by Percival Everett

How To Behave In A Crowd by Camille Bordas

Bob The Gambler by Frederick Barthelme

Name

Ned Russin

Vocation

Musician and writer

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Farrah Skeiky