

On debating your inner critic



Musician and Novelist John Darnielle discusses removing expectations, using doubt as motivation, separating yourself from your work, and honoring the creative process inside you.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2962 words.

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Did you experience doubt when working on your first novel?

It actually helped me. I'm a bit of a doubter. If I go past the airport bookstore and see a movie or TV star, or a talk radio host who's now writing mysteries and see their book in hardback and a big bold display that says "Best Seller," I permanently go, "You got that contract because you have an existing fan base that's going to buy your book."

When I wrote *Master of Reality*, I wanted to make sure somebody that couldn't stand my music would still read the book and go, "Got to give it up, man. That's a good book." The same was true when I wrote *Wolf in White Van*. I didn't want anyone to be able to say, "This is fan service. People who like the Mountain Goats are just going to buy this book and like it." The stars I'm talking about, they have giant existing fan bases. Mountain Goats had fans, but you're not going to the best seller list based on our fans. There's not enough of them, or there weren't at the time *Wolf in White Van* came out. That was a spur in my side while I was writing.

Doubt became a motivator.

Anything like that that I'm going to use as a motivator. Otherwise I'll treat it like a problem, try to get rid of it. Then it's a behavioral tick, something to be addressed in therapy. It benefits me to have an internal critic. A lot of people are tortured by theirs and it prevents them from working. I wrestle with mine, it's useful to me. An imagined audience of people saying, "You can't do this," enables me to go, "Okay, well I hear you and maybe I can't," but it also gives me a windmill to tilt my lance against. I have a strong desire to foil that internal critic. My stuff is going to be weird. It's what I do. I don't try to sand off edges for people, but I do buff and shine to make it the best it can be.

Do you keep the end listener/reader in mind when working?

I'm a member of the audience. I've been listening to the Mountain Goats longer than anybody. If you're a responsible writer, you have to also be a reader and a listener. Hard to do, especially when it's a fresh song you're high on. There's one song I'm in the process of throwing out of the bunch that I'm working on. The day I wrote it, I sent it to some famous friends. They all said it was "nice." Now I listen and go, "It's not as good as the other ones."

You have to be able to occupy multiple roles. To be able to pivot and go, "let me imagine myself as somebody who doesn't listen to this music at all." Since the first time 20 people showed up to see me, those are the people I'm writing for.

Eventually those people will say, "You've grown beyond what it was when I got into it. You followed a muse that wasn't for me." That's fine. You'll make bad art if you go, "Oh, I got to get those guys back." I am conscious of work I think older fans might enjoy or not. We, as a band, are almost always wrong about that.

When we made *Heretic Pride*, we thought old school fans were going to love that record. It seemed weird in the way of the early tapes, a bunch of stories that were self-contained and bizarre. When it came out, there was a lot of, "They keep saying this sounds old school. This doesn't sound old school to me. This sounds highly produced." It was highly produced! I was thinking in terms of the songs themselves. For other people, the veneer of early stuff is a vital and crucial part of that sound. That's fair. When I'm looking at what I'm doing, there's so many angles that I don't prioritize any of them, especially in the heat of the composition. There's 360 degrees to consider and I'm holding them all at once. I'm omniscient in this process.

When you're in it, every angle is available to you. You're in this position of infinite access. If you were to sit there and go, "Well let me think about the fans," you would be doing a disservice to the thing in front of you that keeps announcing every minute of its existence, "I am infinite. There's infinite ways to think about me."

You've said previously that expectations are death—that before an idea is fully-formed, that's the exciting part. What does that moment feel like for you?

That's a very good question. I'm working on something with a specific, unifying theme. Often if you're working with a cast of characters, you can feel like a song you're writing is a set piece only there to move the action along. I remember when writing Tallahassee, sometimes feeling like, "Is this song doing anything but making sure the story has its moving parts?" Some songs didn't make the album, some didn't make the studio session. Eventually you get to where you're going.

What I've noticed since I got back from tour is that you go through a phase thinking, "Yeah, that song is fine, but it overstates its thematic presence in the overall plot arc, or whatever." You reach this point where you're free in your creative process to look at yourself in the mirror and go, "Hey, why don't you go to hell with all your ideas? I'm going to tear them down." Instead I'm bringing a clown into the story or I'm going to let some guy with a truck run over all the principles, then he's going to be the main character. What do you think about that?"

For people who believe in writers' block, that's what's so paralyzing—your freedom is infinite. You can do anything. You have to limit your choices as you go. You reach this space knowing you can throw something away. It doesn't have to be in or out.

That is when the magic happens. The last three songs I've written the band are responding intensely to. I was expressing anxiety a month ago that I wasn't going to get where I wanted. Peter said, "Yeah, I'm not worried." I was offended. "Come on, man. That's putting a lot of pressure on me to say that I always come through." He knows once I locate this zone, I can wake up and write a song every day. I could write three albums between now and December if I wanted to drive myself insane.

You're catching me in this zone right now. It's mania. Not mania that prevents me from washing the dishes, making the bed, or doing errands like some people's artistic mania. I'm able to pivot out of that at midday or something. My wife, when I start writing, I notice she clears a space and starts doing stuff that's my lookout. She knows time has stopped for me. I will be in here for hours and it only felt like one.

Have you developed trust in your process over time?

I believe in studies, something they do in painting, but nobody talks about it in music. Before a painter does the thing, because paint's expensive and because of the amount of effort you are going to put in, you do a number of studies. You paint the thing once, sloppy. You paint it from a different angle. You do multiple studies along the way if you know what the painting is going to be. That's hard for me to understand. When I'm working, there has to be mystery about where I'm going for me to be excited.

I have outlines and plans, but I have to be open to the plan getting blown to bits. With these studies, it's like I know I want to paint flowers in a vase. I do five studies of the flowers in the vase, then get out the expensive oil, good brushes and canvas and paint. That's how I regard my songs. Each one is potentially just a study. Then you're liberated. If you decide you didn't like it, then you can cannibalize it. You can take anything from it and won't be repeating yourself.

Is that a sentiment you've always carried?

I've always thought that way about songwriting and poetry. I probably got it from Rosemary Adams, my high school poetry teacher. When we first met she said, "Tell me about yourself." I said, "My name is John and I want to be a writer." She was a heavy smoker with a deep voice and told me, "Oh, you are a writer." Big moment. She saw that to have the desire means I'm already writing. And what do writers do? They write. Not, they write good stuff. Not, they write stuff that gets published. Not, they write stuff that gets prizes. They write.

To claim that mantle gives you a sense of legitimacy. You understand it's not about prizes. Sometimes getting accolades feels great, but the best thing you can do is to understand that your writing is good whether anybody likes it or not. You don't have to have an audience for it to be good. You know if it's good. Once you have that, you can have a healthy relationship to your work because your work is not you. It's a big part of you. If they took it away, you'd grieve.

That's a tough lesson.

For me it's a liberating moment. It's a tough one if you're a public figure in music because everybody thinks that the music I make is me. Even if they know I'm just telling stories, they think then that I'm a good person. I'm always arguing against this. My work does not tell you jack about me, the quality of me as a person. You only know that if you know me personally. If I've done you a solid or if I've done you wrong. Then you can speak. Otherwise, that my work made you feel things means I'm a talented craftsman, and I'm proud of that. I hope I put my love in and that some of me shines through, but that part is extra. The craftsmanship is no different from building a house. No different from carpentry.

How did studying form in a traditional sense support your craft?

Doing this early in my process liberated me from just focusing on the subject matter, images, or feeling. Feeling is important. I don't mean to minimize feeling, but often in the more expressive arts like poetry and song, we afford so much weight to it that we give ourselves a pass if we cut our craft short because the feeling was intense.

That's rude to your craft and to you, personally. If you want to dignify the feeling, give it the most beautiful house to live in. Then go ham. Let it have its full voice. To restrict it within form is to give it its greatest, most visible body, that's what form is. It's the body in which what you're expressing has to live its entire life. Any life it has exists only within that form.

What does it look like when you sit down to write?

I prefer to go to my office, sit down at the desk, light some incense, mess around doing nothing for an hour or two, looking at records and books. Pacing and talking out loud, arguing with characters and with myself. Then I'll sit down and get going. The novel demands so much space once you're inside it.

I got a song idea as I was about to go to sleep recently. I went, "Oh, that's kind of fun", and turned the light on. I apologized to my wife, she scowled. I put a couple of notes down. I forget if it was in Bear or in the native iPhone notes app. When I woke up, I got up and made breakfast with the kids, made myself some tea, and then went, "Oh, you had an idea, didn't you?" I opened up the phone and was like, "That's kind of cool."

Then I got my guitar. I don't document every step of the process, but know that the song, for the first half hour

of its life, was not anything anybody would have cared about. The lyrical idea was good. Musically, where it was going was not interesting. It was trying hard to do a certain thing. Then I turned a corner. I looked up and it was noon. I'd been in my bedroom for three hours. Once I go in, time is almost completely meaningless. I hadn't had breakfast. I had fed the kids, but at this point I'm not eating. It's getting on noon, but now I have to put a third harmony vocal on it. I'd finished it. I have to get it all done.

The role of your live show is very important to you. How do songs take on new forms live?

Most of the suggestions I make never amount to anything. There's something that happens between musicians. There's people who are megalomaniacs who say, "No, we're going to do it like this and it'll be good." For us they grow as we play them. It's a Grateful Dead thing. They start going someplace. People can play the same parts, but one person leans back a little. Someone starts playing with a pick instead of his fingers. When I write, there's no drummer, but drums become essential to what occurs in the live arena. Everybody's responding in some way to that.

Are you still a runner?

I started courting injury last August. My runs mean the world to me. I was up to 20 miles, was signed up for a marathon, and started to get a glute thing. Everybody says, don't get injured worse. So I didn't run the marathon. The next thing was my achilles. I'm 55 years old and I haven't run more than a mile in months. It's driving me absolutely insane.

Is there a clear link between running and your creative process?

My creativity is in good shape whether I run or not. The word creativity, for most of my life, referred to its end product, to a book or poem or song or painting. I've changed the way I've thought about it. The creative state itself is this eternal state of communion with something much greater than any work it can leave behind. It's this energy space inside everyone. Maybe books and songs aren't your thing, but when you understand that it's in there and that you're infinitely free within it, then you can take that anywhere you're going. You can put your creativity into your run or weight lifting. You can put it into flipping burgers. I've done this by mowing the lawn. When you're doing that, no matter what you're doing, you're in a state of bliss because you're not doing it for yourself and you're not doing it for the results of what you're doing. You're doing it to honor the state of being, to honor that process inside yourself.

I believe strongly in everyone's creative capacity.

There's not a counter argument to that. If you have spent any time with children under five, you know some of them are expressing their creativity in the sandbox, some are expressing it by sitting by themselves singing. Some by swinging or climbing. It's not about the arts. Creativity is infinite. It's as much a part of the human being as vision, smelling, or any of your senses. Everybody is born with that creativity. Where it goes is sort of an accident of time, space, and circumstance, but creativity is your birthright.

John Darnielle Recommends:

SUBSCRIPTION TO ANY TRANSLATION HOUSE: [Center for the Art of Translation](#), [Archipelago Books](#), [Open Letter Books](#), [Deep Vellum](#), etc. The experience of having literature in translation sent to you every month will change your reading habits forever & for the better.

CHEAP '80s SHREDDER GUITARS OVER LAWYER OFFICE TONEWOOD RARES: The amount of pure pleasure to be wrung from that pink Charvel your local pawn shop is selling for \$110.00 cannot be quantified. Shred, shred, and re-shred

MIXCLOUD: I mean, everybody knows about this, right, but you could literally make a [Mixcloud](#) subscription your entire musical diet and want for little for as long as you live. Mixcloud reggae shows dig up the rarest plates, Mixcloud industrial heads carry torches for the most unremembered early 808 adopters, it's honestly a miracle

While I'm at it, **INTERNET RADIO SUBSCRIPTIONS:** [WFMU](#), [The Lot Radio](#), [Hearts of Space](#), etc. There's so so much to hear and dig into – it's easy to forget how spoiled we are for choice in this moment, but even an hour's

reflection will tell you, we have it better for music than any civilization ever

TEA: I quit drinking coffee about five years ago when my heart was doing weird stuff. (It calmed down and I have a runner's heartbeat now, often hovering around 60, so don't worry if you were gonna be worried or party too hard if you were gonna rejoice.) I got into tea. There's a whole world of it! Aged pu-erh! Hei cha! Pressed white tea cakes! Tea inside of dried mandarin oranges! Whole giant world!

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Vocation

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