

On newness versus familiarity



Musician and producer Dan Snaith on the fight against complacency, pushing yourself in the right ways, and the power of music to transform individual hardship into collective optimism

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As told to Victoria Blumenfeld, 4255 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

Can you describe what your creative process and studio physically look like?

Well, I'm in the space right now and it's where I spend almost all of my time when I'm thinking about or doing music. It's a small room in the basement of the house I live in with my family and it's just big enough for one person. There's a bunch of equipment in here, a big pile of records over on one wall, a drum kit in one corner and a microphone next to it, a kind of makeshift booth with curtains around it so I can record vocals, and then a wall of synthesizers.

Before I had kids, I used to work endlessly, any spare moment I had. It's always the thing I've enjoyed doing most, just going in and experimenting and exploring, making music, coming up with something from nothing. Now that I have kids, it stays more nine to five. I get them off to school then work during the day, have dinner, put them to bed and often end up back down here afterwards. When my wife has gone to bed, I tend to stay up a little bit later and listen back to what I had just been working on and see if I can add something or if I still like them.

When you step into your studio, do you walk in with a roadmap or intention of what you want to create? Or are you producing out of randomness and play?

There's never any intention or plan at all. Unless I've got something that I really want to finish, the vast majority of the days it's starting from scratch and not thinking about it as 'is this going to be on the album? Isn't it? Where's this going?' It is just about an exploration and enjoying the process of making music, which I still get so into and excited about. It's never boring. It's never hard to come up with an idea.

Like this time [producing *Suddenly*], I ended up with over 900 draft ideas in this immense playlist and as you'd expect, the vast majority of those aren't going nowhere. They were fun in the moment, but I went back to them and would be like 'that doesn't add anything or there's nothing particularly interesting about that.' So then the question is finding the little draft ideas that do have something exciting and new about them and then the process of 'is that going to turn into a finished track? Is it something that's going to make sense on this album?' That's when I think more about it with a critical frame of mind, like 'does this fit in or add something to what I've done in the past? Does it sound exciting to me? Or does it just feel like retreading familiar territory? What could I do to make a twist on this track that if it's too familiar, can add something new to it?' So the process is almost in two parts, the kind of exploratory phase and then the, "Okay, what have I got now and what have I got to work with?"

I can sense you playing with this idea of familiarity throughout your songs. I think this is reflected so well in *Suddenly*, literally by the name of the album, too. It's as if I almost grasp or recognize a tune or sequence, but

then all of a sudden, very unexpectedly, it changes and what I thought I knew to be true, is no longer. Creativity is inherently something new and imaginative, yet there is this familiarity in your songs. Is this intentional?

So I guess the familiarity is something I don't think I could get rid of if I tried. Over the years I've wanted to get a sense of what it is that makes my music sound like mine and is identifiable as mine. There's been times in the past when I've made music that's very much searching for or recreating something for the past. Increasingly, I want people to be able to put my music on and be like, 'Oh yeah, that sounds like Caribou. That sounds like Dan.'

Then it's been a puzzle to me because, well what are those things? People already had been saying that about my music, like 'Oh yeah, it always has this this melancholic, euphoric, nostalgic kind of feeling or the same kind of melodies,' but I don't know what it is. I'm so close to it and I can't see those things. To some degree, I've learned to embrace those certain things I think of are characteristically mine. Like certain types of chord sequences or the certain way my hands just out of habit end up on the keyboard and play because of all the years I've practiced and improvised and come up with my own ways of doing things.

And then for me, as a music fan and as a person who sees music as a site of innovation, it's about being able to come up with new ideas, something that hasn't been thought of before, or like 'I've never heard that juxtaposed with that.' Obviously within the limited scope, I'm still not making completely avant garde music, but I want there to be something new and something contemporary and something that adds to that. That ends up with a balance I'm really happy with and that I like in other people's music, the kind of blend of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Where, like you say, it has some elements that make you think 'I know this and I recognize this.'

On this album [*Suddenly*], a lot of time it's a left turn that undermines that. For example, there's a track called "Sonny's Time" where I'm playing this Debussy style piano motif and it's bent and warped in this way that it's actually not a real grand piano. The grand piano is like the most familiar sound in the history of music, maybe apart from the human voice. Because it's a digital version of that (it's actually a piece of software), I can bend it and manipulate it in this way that's like, 'Wait a minute, it's familiar and it's unsettlingly slightly not familiar.' I'm aware of that contrast and contradiction and I love moments like that, but it's the newness that I'm searching for. I'm not searching for familiarity, those patterns just come out of me anyway.

If I'm doing the same thing, surrounded by the same people, and interacting with the same place every day, I can imagine that narrow breadth impacting my ability to create something new because I'm not exposing myself to newness. Do you think your routine and stable workplace could at all stifle your creativity?

I do feel that quite often [*laughs*], especially if I've been in the studio for a month and I've generated a hundred of these little loops and ideas and none of them are exciting to me and I'm like, 'Where is this going? What am I doing?' You hear romantic stories about musicians who just go out for a walk, drink a coffee on the left bank of the Seine, and just write some amazing piece of music or like "Yeah, it came to me in a dream, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." They live like wonderful, romantic Bohemian lives and the music kind of comes to them. Like man, that would be a way better life [*laughs*] than the constant grind. I'm fighting with it all the time. I'm wrestling with it to try and find something new, and I enjoy that, but then if it hasn't worked for a long time, I'm like, 'Oh god, why is this happening?'

So I'm fighting against that feeling of 'I've made music for 20 years, am I ever going to make something that I'm really excited about and happy with again? Or have I run out of ideas?' I can always generate ideas, but it's taking it to the next step with something new. I'm always down here and I'm always enjoying it, but I think the drive to not be complacent or to meet my own standards is really the thing that drives me on and on.

But as to the question of whether I should go out and do something different? I do think that, yeah. One person in particular who says just that is my wife. After I've been down here for a month, she comes down and listens to what I've been doing and she's like, "Can you just get out there and do something else?" But this is the way it's always worked for me.

This past year, my wife got me diving lessons, platform diving lessons, for my 40th birthday. It couldn't be anything more different. It's using your body in a kind of gymnastic way and dealing with jumping from great heights. I should say I'm terrible at it. I'm like a good beginner, but she got me this present and I was like, 'Eh what? I don't want to do this.' But now I love it so much and every week I go. If I didn't have anything else, I could spend all my time doing that, or any number of other things. I'm a naturally inquisitive person who just really gets into things. It seems to be that the creation always comes out of this exploration excavation process.

When you do find yourself in a mental rut or feeling creatively stuck, what do you do?

I only get that sense when I look at an overview of what I've done and think, 'Where is this going?' I never get that sense when I'm just making music intuitively and for fun. So honestly, I feel really, really lucky that in all the time I've been making music, that's never gone away. I know people who are like, "I don't want to make music today" and that's never me. If I can turn off the part of my brain that worries about what the value of what I'm going to make is, I always enjoy it.

There's a theory of happiness in philosophy and positive psychology about finding and engaging in a craft that immerses and cultivates a state of flow, as if you no longer feel time. I think it's safe to say producing music for you is that craft and being in your studio begets this flow. Does that resonate with you?

It does. My wife is an anthropologist, so she's brought this notion to my attention before. For me, it definitely is making music. It will feel like the hours pass without me noticing them pass and I just get completely lost in it.

As a listener, too, I can feel a degree of that flow when I go to a concert.

Yeah, so that's really probably a better example than a studio of where it feels like that. Say you're in a festival and there's a band before you, they finished, and then you have to set up. There's this period of rushing and getting everything ready and then you step out on stage and that all just disappears. I feel so comfortable in that environment. It's also nice because the band is four of us who have been playing Caribou songs together for over 10 years. Exactly the same people. We know each other so well musically and are able to interact with one another and get into that state together. The show can pass really easily, just kind of enjoying it floating by or being in the flow of it happening.

At a concert, the listeners and performers almost become a collective consciousness. Because you're all focusing on the same thing, you're not looking at your phone, you're not talking to people, you're moving your body in unison and all of a sudden it's like you're just one giant organism together

Yeah, definitely. As somebody who loves going to see live music and concerts, making them kind of hypnotic or mesmerizing is so much of what is emphasized in the live versions of the songs. I'm working with Jason Evans, who does all my cover art for the albums, and a designer, who has a design company called 5555555, who are making animations that are going to be on a video screen. Not something you actively watch, more something that kind of hypnotizes you and mesmerizes you along with the music. So that's definitely drawing people into being in the same kind of experience, the same kind of space.

Incorporating digital experiences into a concert makes me wonder about the future of music as a whole. How do you see the creative worlds, namely electronic music, evolving as we ourselves become more evolved towards and with technology?

That's a tricky question. Let's take it from the point of view of music listeners first. I still get confronted with the idea that I'm an electronic music producer. Which, of course I am, but it kind of seems to illustrate that there's a blind spot because all the music we listen to in the popular realm is electronic music, in exactly the same way. You know what I mean? There's stylistic differences, but the way a Taylor Swift record is made is in process-wise identical, using the same types of tools and the same editing techniques, etc. My parents'

generation or older are already living in a world where they don't always realize the way music is produced has crossed that boundary that's erased between authentic analog, performed music, or constructed digital music. It's completely blurred together.

There are people, like Sophie, who push that digital aesthetic and disembodied aesthetic. That kind of music that's like hyper, hyper digital and tries to push away from any sense of physical space or ambiance, etc. So that's interesting to me if that'll be the music we increasingly desire or whether this kind of nostalgia will draw us back. As much as the technology, processes, and the way people make and distribute has changed, a whole bunch of the music we listen to is very familiar, conservative, and follows patterns of music composition that have been around for a hundred years or more.

When I listen to music now, occasionally I hear this notion of how much these barriers have been broken down. You can make a song at any tempo you like with as much micro editing and put it together in all sorts of different ways that weren't possible. A lot of those frontiers are being explored already. Whether we'll have those moments of kind of shock dislocation, that kind of Stravinsky or [Bob] Dylan going electric or those historical moments where people have been like, "I don't understand what the kids are listening to anymore." That really intrigues me as to whether that's still possible with so many boundaries being erased.

One interesting thing that I just thought about when you asked that question is this real, potentially big change in the world of recorded music. With my album, this is going to be the finished version, but it does not have to be. There's people like Kanye who notoriously changed his tracks on his album after they were released because they were only released on streaming services and you're allowed back in there. Recorded music now isn't etched into a piece of plastic or some permanent thing. I find it interesting that we live in a world where there's this possibility that you could go back to the album you really love and it could be completely different the next day.

At that point I can't imagine how to keep oneself from going crazy over the endless editing options. I recently bought my first synth and feel a glimpse of that from all the tweaks I can make to change even just one sound. How do you feel solid knowing when you're done with a sequence? Do you wait for it to feel right in your gut?

It's like on a small level, 'Does anything here bother me?' It strikes me if you get enough distance from it. You listen to it as a listener. People ask me about math and music, since I have a math PhD. When you're playing around with abstract ideas in mathematics there's a kind of "kachunk" moment. The pieces just fit together really congruently and there's no question that it couldn't have been any other way. You're like, 'Well, I've done something right here because there's no way it could have fit together like this if I'd made a mistake somewhere along the way.' Music is much more open-ended and ambiguous at times, but there are just times when things fit together kachunk. Then you have to have the sense to be like, "That just works. Don't touch it again." And I guess that's a habit you practice as well. If it's got that thing that feels like it should have been that way, then leave it.

A lot of your songs focus on themes from your own past experiences, relationships you've had, and moments that have unmoored and moved you. When you walk into your recording studio, are you bringing in these personal experiences in the door or do you leave them outside?

I think it's just inevitable, particularly in the last five years making this record. There were things like death, divorce, and health crises in the family that were really catastrophic. They required everything to stop and my whole family to gather together and deal with. I didn't really intend to have it all be in there, but at the same time, how could it not be in there? And in the end, a lot of those things are in there. Extremely specifically in the lyrics and the tone of the songs. It's just staring right back at me and the people who know my life will recognize it. So yeah, I felt like it would have been a dodge, it would have been an evasion to have those things not be in there. When I listen back to the kind of emotional tone in the album, there's lots of hardship and difficult things that have been part of my life and the life of people that I love and are close to me in the last five years.

Quite often I've been in the same role, which is the person that needs to be there, be supportive, be comforting

and be helpful to the main protagonist in whatever the situation is. Listening back, I hear that in the music—a sense of wanting to comfort and wanting to make something positive and optimistic out of something difficult. And I think the music also does that for me. For example, the last track was written during the time that my dad was going through this health crisis and I was dealing with the idea of his mortality. And the music is therapeutic for me for sure in processing those things. So there is no way to separate off that part of my life from the music that I make. Physically I can hear my family life, I can hear little feet running around since I'm in the basement of the house. I hear them thunder in when they come home from school and it's just so integrated into my life and that's what it feels like it should be doing for me. It should, from my perspective, aside from thinking of like making music that fits in the broader culture somewhere, it should capture all those things. That's what, to some degree, that's its purpose.

Going back to this idea of familiarity we talked about earlier, I think that's among the reasons why your music is so special to me. You're reflecting back these shared experiences and themes we all face. There's such a power to an artist who can invoke empathy in their listeners, to be able to make someone think, "Oh, it feels like I can relate to you because I know the feelings you're going through."

That's good to hear. Tangentially related to that, I've felt some of the music that I love the most comes from a particular time and political climate, a particular culture or free jazz, spiritual jazz from New York in the late '60s early '70s, etc. Something that's really rooted in its time and speaks to its time and tells us about it and is political in the sense that it explicitly engages with the kind of political climate at the time. I've always felt like that was a failing in the music I made in that it tried to be timeless in the sense of not being from a specific time.

My favorite example is an album that I've completely fallen in love with over the years I was making *Suddenly*. It's by Beverly Glenn Copeland and it's called *Keyboard Fantasies*. It's almost a new age sounding record with digital '80s synthesize sounds. He's a trans man and has this beautiful captivating voice in the center of his music with the most heartfelt warm, familiar melodies...a voice that just packs so much emotion into it. There's obviously a lot of particularities about that kind of political setting, but the way the music absorbs that and then projects outward is in this beautiful, open, empathetic, inclusive, and encompassing way. It's like a big hug. It's like getting a hug, listening to that record.

To be able to speak and unite people who are in difficult circumstances and are very different from one another is also a political component. It has a universality about it. Not that I'm saying my music has done that, but that gave me a way into like, 'Okay, here are these particular difficult circumstances that I've been going through. What can my music do that's productive, that will hopefully whatever circumstances people listening to it are in, will find it nourishing and speak to them in that way?' So I'm glad to hear that to some degree that's the impression that you got.

Are there any pieces of advice you have for aspiring artists?

I can still vividly remember making music as a teenager and thinking there was no way for me to get from here to where I want to be, which is releasing music and where I am right now traveling the world and playing my music. It felt like there was no line between here and there. If people send me music, I don't get to reply to everybody, but I try to listen to as much of it I can and get back to people. When I was a teenager, that would have meant the world to me. Just somebody who's already doing it, getting back and saying, "Yeah this music is good. Keep at it and enjoy what you're doing." There is a connection between people who are doing it and people who are trying to do it.

I always emphasize doing it because you enjoy doing it. That was always the primary motive for me and it still is. You've heard me talk about not knowing whether I'm actually going to be able to make a record, even after 20 years, or if what I make will turn into something I feel like is worth releasing. Who knows? But just enjoy making a piece of music today and that's enough. That will accumulate and aggregate to the point where I'm sure it will be of interest to other people. Stick with it and follow the things that inspire you.

Dan Snaith Recommends:

1. *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace Wells. As depressing and devastating as it is to read, it's so important. It's about the climate crisis and grapples with the actual realities of where we're at.
2. Brett Story's documentary *The Hottest August*. Brett's a friend of mine and she's one of the most remarkable thinkers and filmmakers I know. She's a geographer by training and it's about New York in the summer of 2017 and an elliptical way of talking to people in different parts of the city in different experiences but not talking directly about the climate. Somehow that bubbles out of what she's doing and it's super cleverly edited together. It's an absolutely beautiful film and very timely.
3. I will repeat it again because I want people to check this out. The Beverly Glen Copeland album, *Keyboard Fantasies*. Or any of his music actually. It was reissued recently and I feel like if you play it for somebody they'll be like, 'what on earth is this?' It'll open your ears again.
4. Swimming lets me unwind. It's also stimulating and nourishing.
5. I grew up in Ontario and there's this landscape I'm really familiar with called the Muskokas. Funny enough it's actually where the album *Keyboard Fantasies* was recorded. It's also in the Canadian Shield and basically rocks and lakes and pine trees. Friends of ours have a cottage there and we all meet there every summer. I swim across the lake every day. There's no cell phone reception. There's no internet. It's just a beautiful place to be.

Name

Dan Snaith

Vocation

Musician, Producer

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