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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2342 words.

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# On choosing a healthy path

DJ, musician, and art director Juan Mendez—better known as Silent Servant—discusses the ways in which being a DJ has influenced his creative process, and why holding onto a day job can help keep you sane.

**You're a DJ, a producer, and an art director. Your creative work allows for a kind of synthesis of all those things. Having spent so many years as a working DJ—and having lots of experience playing music in large rooms full of people—how does that influence the kind of music you make?**

I think it does influence my music. As a DJ, I try to keep up the momentum at all times. For example, sometimes I'll DJ at a friend's party, which is a Smiths night, because I'm a really big dork about loving The Smiths. We were laughing because even when I'm playing Smiths records, I still play them like I'm DJing a party. I don't let the entire record play. I look for the next best spot in the song to switch over to something else because I want to keep people dancing. That's how I think about it.

Growing up, we had this record store I loved called Norwalk Records. They used to sell these DJ bootleg master mix 12-inches. It might be like a master mix of '80s hits—like Depeche Mode, New Order, Human League—and they would all be mixed together, so you could just put that 12-inch on and let it play. No song got to overstay its welcome before getting mixed into the next song. I have always carried that idea into how I DJ. I always notice the potential for momentum. When you're DJing you see when people get tired of a song, especially when you're playing techno. It can be like a sedative, so there's got to always be some dynamic movement.

When I make music, I'm kind of taking all those things into account. I want music that is dynamic but that also has an element of immediacy. I've always been a big fan of that. I still love going to see bands because there's an immediacy to what they're doing sometimes, even if it's not the most original band in the world. If you're going to go see some kind of synth punk band, it's gonna be a synth punk band. It's been done. But at the same time, the energy harnessed sometimes when people are doing things like that, you can't replicate that another way. It has this tactile element. So for me it's about trying to make something that is a combination of what it was like to see live bands, what I like about techno stuff, and what I like about DJing. When I make music, it's usually all those things together.

**The technology available to make electronic music has changed radically since you first started doing it. Is your creative process influenced by that? For instance, does newer, smaller, faster gear change the way you make songs?**

Maybe it's kind of sad, but since I started I've maintained the same method. It's always been working with software, and then maybe an external sequencer. I always try to make things that sound somewhat timeless, but at this point it's hard because it's like everything is a big mess. New music sounds like such a jumble of things, so you can't really say what's where, or what's old or new. I can't tell if it's a good or a bad thing.

I feel like, after this most recent record, I have to completely rethink the way I work. There's no way for me to do it that way again because I think I've reached my limit of what I can create with in this way. I could make songs within the same themes, but I will not be able to create something authentically new in my mind, until I learn some new shit. I feel like I've reached a cap. I was able to slightly reinvent what I did before in a way that was really personal, which was a cathartic experience that I needed to have. But next? I don't know.

There are pros and cons with everything. It's interesting to play around with gear and hear people talk about what kind of equipment they use—and there are definitely advantages and disadvantages to using certain kinds of gear, especially as a DJ—but at the end of the day, gear is gear. I remember hearing the owner of Warp Records talking about this once. He was saying there are artists that take their equipment and make it do what they want versus the equipment dictating what they do.

It's like someone who has a really expensive guitar. It's like, "Yeah dude, you can play 'Stairway to Heaven.' Killer. But can you make something interesting? Something new?" That's the thing. Tools are just tools. What matters is what you do with them.

**Do you still balance doing art direction work with doing music?**

I've always worked and did music stuff at the same time. The past two years were the first time I actually

quit my job and did music full-time, but previously—for the past 15 years or so—I would do both. I would work full-time and then go away to do gigs on the weekends or on short tips, then come back come to work.

**How did it feel to not do that anymore? To give up the day job?**

It was weird. I didn't do well with it, let's put it that way. It just wasn't good for me. I learned that I'm a person that needs structure. With no structure, shit just like, kind of flew out the window, basically.

I quickly started realizing that. I've never really been much of a drinker, but over the past few years, man, I was wondering, "Am I becoming an alcoholic by default because I have nothing better to do?" It got really depressing. This is just my personal experience. This is not a comment on what the culture of electronic music is like or anything, but it was just too easy. Me and my friend Dave were talking about it yesterday. It's like when you go to a work party and there's an open bar. What happens? People get fucking trashed. Right? If you are a DJ, your entire job is an open bar. Every night. It's almost encouraged. So it's hard to manage. And then you combine that with any mild social anxiety, and what's the first thing that anyone does? They fucking drink. It becomes a cycle.

I started too late, in regards to DJing full-time. Starting at 38, not a wise choice. I've been DJing internationally for a long time, but to suddenly be doing *only* that, every weekend, it's just really taxing. The hours are brutal. I do headline a little bit more now and with extended hours at clubs, it's like I'm always playing at around 3:00 to 5:00 am. Or like 4:00 to 6:00 am. Those are not healthy hours for anybody. If you could sleep all night and then get up early and go to your set, then it might be OK, but usually you are traveling for 10 hours and you arrive with only a couple of hours to eat something and rest and then it's go time. You have to be super regimented and disciplined, in my opinion, to handle that in a healthy way and to not drink, and not do drugs.

**Most artists have the fantasy of making a living from their art and not having to do anything else, but the reality of that can be much different. I think it's great to talk about the fact that not everyone is actually well-suited for that.**

Yeah. I have some friends that I've always been envious of—people who left it all out there on the table, where there was this element of really living and dying by your art. At some point I just realized that I didn't know if I could really do that. I found myself going to a dark place, especially with all that extra time to think about things. I was watching documentaries on people like Chet Baker, who was a genius and a fuck up. People just let him be that way. Like, talented as fucking all hell. But dude, he's a junkie, man. And it's like, he lived that life. And he lived it until he died.

My problem was that you start identifying with these things as a part of the creative process. That somehow you need to be fucked up or that it's helping you or that you need it in order to cope. You're just putting all this pressure on yourself, because you need to do *something*. This is your only job now. Be creative. I'm lucky. I have a good family. I have a good support system. But it just really fucked with my head, basically.

**What was the solution, ultimately? Did you go back to having a day job? Or did you put yourself on some sort of a schedule?**

Well, I tried putting myself on a schedule. I needed some kind of external responsibility. As we're speaking, I'm currently working remotely on a design job. I am basically going to go back to that. I needed a change. I was having this conversation all the time about not liking certain things about my life. And I'm like, "Dude, when have I ever not made a change when I didn't like something this much?" So I was like, "Fuck it. I have to make a change. Because if not, I don't know where this is gonna end up."

I was doing a lot of dumb shit that I have never done in the past. It was getting so extreme that even my friends were like, "Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you? Are you okay?" It was mostly just because I had nothing fucking better to do. I know I'm not that person. I don't want to be that person. So I had to get my shit together and for me that meant going back to work.

There are so many things that can get in your head. People have this idealized version of who you are because of the music that you make, or the art that you make, but I don't necessarily want to be *that* person all the time. So you're constantly in a struggle with tearing things down that you've created. It can be a really destructive, confusing process.

I like doing things other than just making and playing music. And at a certain point I realized that I needed to be doing more of that stuff. I'm always gonna make music. That's never gonna stop. I'm always gonna DJ. It's just that the way that part of my life has been structured, at least the way it is right now, is just not suitable for me. It's one thing to be a crazy fuck-up when you're younger, but not at 40. It just doesn't work. It makes you tired. And when you're always tired, you do dumb shit. The whole thing just feels super messy.

**Do you have young kids hitting you up for advice about music? And if so, what do you tell them?**

Oh yeah, all the time. I try to help people. I've been lucky that there were older people around who taught me. I had people like Joshua Kit Clayton, who was one of the main people who taught me how to make music. I met Karl O'Connor, who's Regis. The main thing I learned from Karl was how to operate within the music world from an ethical standpoint. He has his ethos and you can't fuck with it. I hate saying this

because by no means am I a punk. I've never really been into punk. I like post-punk shit. That's what I got into. I was never a punk. Ever. I was a fucking new wave nerd, basically. But I did believe in a very punk rock kind of obsessive dedication to what you do. I appreciated artists like Cabaret Voltaire and how they lived. Or Throbbing Gristle and Nitzer Ebb. Their whole thing was a product. Here's a product of our fucking factory. We've thought about every part of it. Creation Records. Same thing.

So maybe you think about your work as product coming from this very specific place. And you live and die by that, you believe in it—maybe to a fault. You have to think about what you're doing as creating your own world—and then totally believing in it. That's the best way to get anything done. What are other people doing? Who cares? You don't care. Because what you're doing matters the most to you. And you just keep going.

Also, not everyone is lucky and, of course, there is some element of luck involved in things like this—but if you keep pushing, eventually, at some point, something will hit. If you're doing your best and pushing it in the right way, something will happen. Self-sufficiency and having your own specific point of view will get you further than anything else.

All the other stuff, like having your work on SoundCloud or whatever, is also important and you have to maintain all of that stuff, but again... I think you stand out when everything looks like it's coming from a very specific place and point of view. The music, the visuals, they should all work together. Again, this is just my opinion, but if there's anything that I tell my friends it's just to stay the course. That's it.

Juan Mendez recommends:

Crescent (band)

Suicide (band)

Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle by Simon Ford

The Voice of America by Cabaret Voltaire

Chondritic Sound (label)

Name

Juan Mendez

Vocation

Musician, DJ, Art Director, Producer

Fact



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