

On being curious and engaging with the intelligence of your medium

An interview with Musician and Radio Host David Garland

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As told to Nick Yulman, 2976 words.

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For decades, you've worked as a musician, as well as a radio host and journalist, exploring and celebrating a range of creative music. How do those two perspectives inform and enhance each other in your work?

They are both motivated by curiosity: a curiosity about my own process and a curiosity about other people's. My interest in hearing what other musicians are doing, especially people who are bringing imagination to it, is another manifestation of how I look at my own work. What can I do to maximize my own imagination?

I don't know exactly that doing the radio show has inspired a piece of music or vice versa, but I've always felt that as a musician or as an interviewer and a radio presenter, my best resource, my best quality is my curiosity. I hope there's also some skill on the instruments, or some skill in the conversation and the microphone and that sort of thing, but if anything goes wrong with the equipment, if my notes drop out of my hand in an interview, or there's any kind of surprise or impediment, I don't worry much because I know all I have to do is be curious.

Just ask the question that is sitting in front on you in the conversation?

Yes, and it's always important to me to actually listen. I've heard interviews, maybe I did it myself at the beginning as well, where someone's working with planned questions and the interviewee suddenly makes a really interesting point that was unexpected and the interviewer goes on to the next planned question instead of following up and really having a conversation.

I try to do that with my music as well. I went to art school and yet somehow I've ended up in all these non-visual things with music and with radio. But I learned something in art school that I apply all the time: to engage with the intelligence of your medium. It's not about controlling your medium, it's about engaging with it and having a kind and inquisitive conversation.

That was something I learned when sculpting in clay, but I've found it to be applicable to any kind of creative activity. You bring something to it, you get something from it—it's an investigative process. That's very literal with an interview, and maybe less so with music but very important to me with music. That's the kind of musician I am. I'm not going to sit down at a desk and silently write down notation. It's always a process of interaction with a sound.

You've referred to yourself as a "songwright." Can you say a bit more about that?

Well, I coined that term and it didn't catch on, so I'm not using it much, but yeah, songwright as in a playwright or a boatwright. That suffix means "a builder." So yes, I did feel that rather than being a songwriter, my attitude and was more of a songwright, someone who was building songs and intrigued by the natural materials of the medium, but not entirely convinced that I want to do it in a certain style or tradition.

I'm always fascinated with the materials at hand, like with music, the materials of tonality, sound color, melody, harmony, and rhythm—all the basics. I try to take nothing for granted and to question how all those elements get used. That's not all the same thing as saying, "I take the idea of melody and I throw it out." I don't do that. I question it, I weigh it, I wonder about it. I try to be pliable with it, I try to investigate it in new ways.

In your music and radio shows, you've explored the continuum of music making, from pop and folk songwriting to experimental and classical composition. We are used to having clear lines drawn between these things. It seems like you don't necessarily see those lines or see them differently. Is that a purposeful strategy for you, to subvert genre, or do feel like it's a natural outgrowth of your genuine interest in sound and the properties of music?

Music serves different functions for different people. For a lot of people, the pleasure they find in music is simply as a sort of chronological reminder. You know, "I love that song because it reminds me of when I was in high school on my first date." Those are wonderful reasons to love music, but they're not reasons that have anything to do with music's own intrinsic attributes. It's just using it as kind of a landmark in the chronology of your life. I was always most keen about music that did not just continue a tradition. I loved things where there was evident imagination and where expectations were surprised instead of met. So that's what I've always found most stimulating myself.

I was very lucky with the radio work that I've done. I've always been able to just choose what I felt was most worthy of putting on the air. Those were always the things that sort of fell between the stylistic cracks because that's where the excitement was to my ear. People often told me, "Wow, I've never heard that before—thank you for broadening my world this way." So I know that people have a hunger for unusual things and new musical and creative ideas. They don't always know where to find it, but that was part of the fun of putting it on the radio because then it's there, floating in the air, ready for someone to catch it.

Are there things that you've learned from the people you've interviewed over the years that have been particularly useful for your creative practice?

Aoibh comes to mind as someone who thinks about music in a very different context from me. I'm thinking about notes and she's thinking about... I don't know, levels of power and of light and movement and these things that are mind-opening to me. My arms already feel full with what I'm working on, but then it's wonderful to see someone else whose arms are full with these other ideas.

I've talked to so many people who each make me aware of different styles or working, the people who are very spontaneous, the people who like to revise, the people who know the theory behind what they're doing, and those who don't. Everyone has a slightly different perspective, but it is fun when you encounter someone whose perspective is quite different on the process.

With Yoko Ono, I got to know her and I just have such respect for her work and her mind, which is so thoughtful and yet so surprising. She's always looking at the same things that you and I look at and she's seeing something else; seeing connections that we didn't see; or seeing them from an angle that is revelatory, surprising, or enriching.

With yoga, I learned that there's always another level to which you can relax. You try to relax your muscles and then you can relax them further, and then further. You think you let the tension out of your body, but there's always more tension to release. With someone like Yoko, I feel like you think your mind is open and you can find there's always another door or window that can be opened to a bigger or deeper vision.

Do you ever interview yourself about what you're doing as part of the creative process—asking yourself some of the same questions you might ask another musician who's sitting across from you in the studio?

No. [laughs] With my own creative process it's a funny mix of conscious choices and the joy of unconscious choices. I don't intellectualize my process so much as I want to just experience the process, which is a give and take between the deliberate and the spontaneous and the conscious and the unconscious. If I can make those things work together and interact, then I would rather do that than ask myself questions about what I'm doing.

The new album you're working on, *Verdancy*, is four hours long and features a tremendous number of collaborators. When you're starting a project do you know what form it's going to take?

Well, I definitely didn't sit down and say, "Now, today I'm going to start making a four-hour-long album." The duration grew out of the special instrument that is heard on most of the tracks, an acoustic twelve-string guitar that my son, Kenji Garland, modified with electronics. It doesn't plug into an amp—it's a genuinely electroacoustic instrument, using electronics to cause acoustic vibrations of wire and wood, the body of the guitar.

It's an instrument that will start playing on its own when the power is turned on; the strings will gradually start to vibrate even if you don't pluck them. It's awake and alive in a way. Sometimes those vibrations and pulses develop quite gradually. So it was clearly telling me things—and this gets back to my idea of the intelligence of your medium. One thing it was telling me was to slow down, to just listen and maybe you don't want to change to another chord yet—stay with this one for a while because you don't know how it's going to evolve.

I had to react to it. That was very stimulating and tied into my move from the city to the Hudson Valley. That move from the city to the country made me aware of something more clearly than I had been before, which is the continuousness of change. We see the world mostly in terms of patterns: the pattern of our breath, the pattern of day and night, the pattern of the seasons, and the patterns imposed on us by clocks. We think incrementally, but the world actually moves continuously, and so does this guitar. It wants to continue. It's not periodic. Both the instrument and my environment just kind of turned my attention to a larger movement, and it was very natural to do the longer pieces.

With something of that scale, or in general with your projects, how do you know when it's done?

This instance was a little harder than other times because if I was making a four-hour album, then why not a five-hour or why not three? There was a point earlier in the winter where I realized, "Wait a minute. I want to put this out on the first day of spring so I've got to wrap things up."

I go through a process with all my creative work, it's true with the podcast and it's true with music, where I look very carefully at my resources, I pull things together, I have a vision I try to carry out. I allow myself to be shifted spontaneously and I want to dot the i's and cross the t's and then I'm done.

There's a sense of mystery on my part about some of the pieces I created for *Verdancy*. I was going out on a limb and stylistically—there isn't the context to say, "Okay, I did this right because it sounds like so-and-so's piece. I was in territory I hadn't heard before, so I had to just say, "Okay, this feels right right now and I'm gonna go with that."

How did the collaborators that you chose for this album fall into place? Are there any particular examples of finding the right person for a piece you were working on?

Iva Bittová is a fantastic singer and violinist, I've known of her work since the 1980s when she was living in the Czech Republic, and she knew of my work back then as well. We crossed paths over the years, but then it turns out that now she's living in the next-door town here in the Hudson Valley, so it was a good opportunity to collaborate. She's just a wonderful collaborator because she is super creative and brings so much skill and such a wealth of ideas to what she's doing.

There was an instance in one piece on the album, "Fovidej mi," which means "speak to me" in Czech, where I had created the chordal pattern and the basic sound of the thing and then I had kind of a vision of Iva's voice and a flute player Steven Gorn, who plays an Indian style flute. That usually doesn't happen to me. Usually I work out my colors and my arrangement gradually, but this was sort of like a dream and I realized those two elements were what the piece needed and it fell into place beautifully.



Iva Bittová recording 'Fovidej mi' in David Garland's studio.

There's a young guy who plays the double bass on the album and he is probably heard more than any other musician. He's name is Julian Lampert and I met him through Iva's son in fact. He's just a wonderful player. He was sort of a dream come true because he can read music, he plays in orchestras, but he's an improviser and it was just a wonderful musical connection. We worked together a lot because he could provide the low end and the sound I wanted, but even more importantly, he could bring his own ideas.

There's a piece that's sung in Latin ["Lux Temporalis"] and I wanted voices that were kind of like early music voices but not really. I didn't want a classical sound to it, and I realized that Arona Dyer, who also lives not too far from me in this area, would be a great voice for it and she was totally up for it.



David Garland's ensemble performing 'Lux Temporalis' at Basilica Hudson. Photo Alon Koppel.

It sounds like there's been quite a bit of continuity in the way you've approached making music.

I think so. I'm 63 years old but when I play music I have no age whatsoever. I'm still that same person who's always been playing music all through my life. Age is really not a factor. Maybe experience is, but I don't know, it's a particularly ageless activity, maybe because it allows you to be in the moment. You're not so much thinking about your history and other things that make you old. You're experiencing sound and your age is irrelevant.

It's not like it's a fountain of youth that you go to in order to feel young. For me it's a continuity. It's something I've been doing since I was a kid, it's something I keep doing. I keep being motivated by the process itself, motivated by discovery and curiosity and trying to build and hear the things that I haven't heard before.

Is there anything that you wished you'd known when you were first getting started or something that you've learned that would have made you approach things in a different way?

I structured my life so that I never needed to make money from my music. I always had a job. I was a graphic designer for many years and then I was on the radio for many years. Since I knew my interests in music were non-mainstream, I never expected to make a living from it, but maybe 10 or 15 years ago I might have said, "Well damn it, probably I should have tried to." You know, then I'd be doing only the music and there'd be perhaps a more fulfilling way to live. But now the context has changed again and even people with strong reputations are having a hard time making money with music, so I don't have that regret anymore.

I think I probably structured my life wisely, especially since I had a great job, which was fulfilling in itself and that was the way I supported my creative work, so that worked out pretty well. I was lucky.

It certainly seems to have fed your creative work in interesting ways too.

Yeah, I think so. I don't think I would have pointed myself in a different direction. I think I went the way I had to go to maintain my independence and to put myself in a position where I was free to be as unconstrained as I have been as a musician. I've never tried to fit into a style. To fit into a style would not have been honest. I was too curious to just follow a genre.

David Garland recommends:

Grapefruit, by Yoko Ono. Yoko's 1964 book is an inspiring brain-cleanser for me. I set one of her texts from that book, "Color Piece," to music.

The Spinning On Air podcast where I sound people out about their experiences, and where we experience sound. Here's a recent episode featuring a rare interview with composer and vocalist Julius Eastman, plus a solo vocal performance by Eastman not heard since 1984.

Musical instruments in general, and specifically the guitar my son Kenji Garland modified for me. These simple videos show some of its qualities.

Good design. I'm very inspired by the wise simplicity of midcentury modern design. I'm fortunate to live in a tecbuilt home. My wife Anne Garland just made a website for one of our favorite midcentury ceramicists, Richard Saar.

Image making. I've been making pictures that are sort of photo mosaics. Like my music, they're inspired by aspects of nature, and somehow the process of making the images feels a lot like making my music. A few can be seen here

Name

David Garland

Vocation

Musician, Radio Host, Journalist

