

On listening and learning



Musician and songwriter Kristian Bush on creating open spaces in your life to experiment, making an effort to seek out people who can teach you new things, and the value of understanding your own strengths and weaknesses.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3070 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#), [Education](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

When you are constantly juggling big projects—and playing in big bands—how do you do so without going insane? Or without feeling like every moment of your life is scheduled down the the exact second?

The more empty spaces I can keep in my schedule, the better. I don't mean the more non-working spaces, I just mean empty. Like today, for instance, when we hang up, the day becomes mine until about 4pm. I have a studio here in town and I painstakingly made sure that there's enough money in an account to pay the salary of this incredible engineer to work with me. I can go over there and work with him today, and if I don't go over there, he'll mix the things we did last week. If I do go over there, we'll make something brand new. If somebody calls me or emails between now and then, I might make whatever they're asking for. It's this incredibly reactive space that I've designed for myself, because when Sugarland took a break, suddenly my over-scheduled life disappeared. There was an absolute nothingness. I didn't have a publishing deal. I didn't have anything. It was very anxiety-driving. It was this feeling that, if I take wild stabs at nine different things, maybe one will stick.

I got used to this idea of being a mercenary creator. My successes were primarily with the bands I've been in, whether it's Billy Pilgrim or Sugarland or whatever. It was hard to value consistent success outside of that. Creatively, I just had to start over. I had to get comfortable with last-minute scheduling, thinking on my feet. If someone calls and says, "Hey, man. You want to write a record?" I'm like, "Uh, yeah!" They are like, "Can you do it in a week?" I was like, "Yeah?" You just smile, say yes, and go figure it out. It feels like it's no different than the anxiety of youth, in creation. It's just the stakes are higher. Or, you're afraid somebody actually might be listening this time.

I read that while your band was on hiatus, you spent time traveling to different cities all over the world and meeting with other songwriters, people working in wildly different genres. What was the experience of dropping into worlds of people who are making music maybe outside your frame of reference? What was your takeaway and how did that affect your own process?

It was like the first time you go to a comparative religion class. The metaphor would be, you sit with a Buddhist, you sit with a Hindu, you eventually sit with someone of every faith, and you find out that they basically are all the same. Dinner with each person is just dinner. They each sit in a hopeful space. I think that the question that I was looking to answer was, "What if I just got lucky, and I've been yes'd the whole time?"

There are two bands that are my 10-year-bands each, Billy Pilgrim in the '90s, and Sugarland in the 2000s. One of the things that's the same in both bands is that there are incredible singers. These people who have a natural ability to sing in a such away that makes you feel emotional, even if they're not even saying a word yet. It's

like somebody saying, "Hey, man. I've got the fastest car available. Would you like to drive?" Most people just drive it at, like, 40, 50 miles an hour around the corner, because they don't want to hurt it. Somehow, I've been lucky enough with both of these human beings that I trust them, they trust me, and we will drive 300 miles an hour. I wonder, holy moly, are my songs getting sung by very talented, emotional people who just naturally have the ability to sell it with their voice? Is the singer giving it more success than the song has intrinsically? I asked myself, "Gee, as the guy who's not singing here, have I just been propped up?" I wondered sometimes, "Wow. What if I suck? Who would tell me?"

So I decided to go to places where people don't care about what I do or my work. I'd just say, "Hello. Teach me what you do." Then, maybe I'll learn. Let's assume that I suck. How do I get better? Well, you can't go to songwriting school. The only thing I had was just a little bit of a Wikipedia page, so when people typed me in, they'd be like, "Oh, he seems legit." I started asking friends, "Who do you know in Sweden that's an awesome songwriter or producer? Let's go there." So I did that. Then I went to London, then to LA. I was lucky that Sugarland seems to be the one country band that doesn't get stuck on you like Teflon. We show up, and you don't have to wear a hat, boots, or anything, and you can still be participating in country music. Well, a lot of these songwriters would let me in the room because they don't really hear me as a guy who does that.

No one's sure what I really do. I flew under the radar, so I was able to absorb these different things. I realized that the one thing most people are missing is an easier lyric. It's really what most people are missing. There are a lot of different ways to do the math on music. The Swedes do it one way. The British do it another. This is a generalization, but Austin does it differently than LA, who does it differently than, maybe, San Francisco, who does it differently than even Seattle or New York. There's different flavors to all of these different kinds of songwriters. I'm a better man and a better songwriter because of the experience of meeting all these people and seeing their process, that I know. I now understand a lot more about where I suck. It's super helpful, because when I'm asked to do something, I can help myself to better navigate to a solution, or I can call up the right person to ask. So if I'm like, "Man, I don't have any idea how to do this. How do you do this?" Somebody else says, "Oh, well that's easy. It's just a Tom Waits song, minus the weird words, plus this."

I know sometimes people react adversely when someone says, "You know what? I'm going to go make my dance record now." People can be like, "That's not what we want from you." Again, that has to do with people's expectations of you, more so than what your own abilities are. Did the experience of spending time with all of these different kinds of songwriters make you want to go out and make a totally different kind of record of your own?

Absolutely. I have three or four different kinds of records going simultaneously right now. I have songs brewing for all of my projects, plus some different kinds of experiments that I'm squishing together. Last year I got an assignment from my brother. He's like, "Man, just as a pure experiment, let's make some songs that would've appeared on a Grateful Dead record between January and March of 1970." I was like, "Holy shit! How am I gonna do that?" He's like, "Well, you did it for *Troubadour*." That was this country musical I worked on. I was like, "Okay. Okay. Fine." He goes, "New caveat: you can't write any of the music. You can only write lyrics." I was like, "Are you kidding me?" He's like, "Nope. We will send you the music." I think it might be my favorite thing right now.

What advice do you have for young songwriters, particularly those who are interested in trying to crack the code when it comes to writing pop songs or country songs?

I just don't think they listen enough. My advice is to really listen. I always tell people that you can teach a poet commercialism, but you can't teach a commercial writer poetry. It's my biggest thing. One thing you can do is find the right people around you that can hold up your weaknesses. Maybe, your weakness is your strength. Maybe, if you suck at poetry, you need to find a good lyricist in your life, and learn to be in a creative partnership. Or maybe the lyrics are your strong suit and you need someone to support you in other areas. It's about finding out what your strengths are and playing to those, while understanding that you might not be great at every part. I love mentoring people, because someone did it for me. I feel like it's something I have to do. It brings me as much joy as it brings anybody else.

What does that process feel like to you? Is it just about helping someone be the best version of themselves, or unlocking the thing that they're good at?

There's a great deal of fear about making stuff. When you write your first few songs, you're so anxious to play them for anybody, because you don't want anyone to know your feelings. It can be like showing someone your diary. That's just a basic situation that everyone experiences. I think everyone who ever listens to a song anywhere, especially someone who has never written a song, thinks, "Oh, my god. Rod Stewart is telling me about his feelings." He may or may not be doing that. One Elvis Costello song later and you realize it's a maze. It's a puzzle, and you gotta untwist it to get it. Then, he's telling you about his feelings. I love to calm them down, because a lot of people, they're just so anxious and maybe worried about all the wrong things. The mythology of the music business is alive and well, but now there is this weird, new version of it. There's an entire generation of 20-somethings who never existed without *American Idol*, and who have been hearing people say things like, "Man, that's the right voice, but the wrong song."

It's like the value of the song has gone through the roof, but the ability to make money on it has tanked. Until they figure out the internet, it's never going to be a real job. Not the way it was in the past. There's a mythology now to the truth of the starving artist. "Man, how do I do this? How do I make this work?" Even people who get record deals, they're staring at it like, "Man, how do I go play arenas? How do I make this go?" To keep the mythology going, you need a little bit of an impossible goal. It needs to be impossible for you to do. Otherwise, why would you spin around doing it? Most people who end up here, in the music business, and actually go into the artist side of it, they're already kids from the gifted class. They have a knack for doing it and an impossible drive. They also have the ability to adapt.

I keep telling people, I'm like, "Man, don't knock Kenny Chesney. He might be one of the smartest people you've ever met. You're missing the point." He's been doing stadiums since you were in middle school. There's a reason that happens. You can't judge another person like that. I just recently worked with Craig Finn, which was super freaking cool. I don't know what happened. There was a day I woke up, where I was like, "Country music needs better lyrics, and I don't know how to get them." I feel country music moving back, in a way, thanks to people like Chris Stapleton, who started to move the needle back. Watching that needle come back has been really exciting for me, because suddenly, I'm back in fashion. Songs about real things, fewer songs just about trucks.

I found a way to reach Craig, and I said, "Hey, man. If you ever come to Atlanta, would you mind taking a writing appointment? I don't know if you do or not, or if you co-write, or if you don't co-write, but I'm a fan, and I'm also interested in what this collaboration would be like." He was coming to Atlanta for something—I guess he speaks at a lot of churches, which I think is really interesting. I didn't know this about him, but there's a whole religious angle to what he's doing, and a whole Catholic angle. He came to town, and he spent two days here in Atlanta with me. We wrote six songs, and recorded them, all in two days.

I learned so much from him. It was a perfect encapsulation of, like, I sing one song by myself, he sings one song by himself, and everything else, we do together. We're either singing at the same time, like it's the Proclaimers or something, or we're trading stuff off. It's just the weird Venn diagram of the music that we both like. He's like the version of me that never saw country music as an option. I'm the version of him that never left Georgia. We see the world in a similar set of pain moments. When I talk about mentoring, or I talk about artists, or what they believe, or what they don't believe, I look at the success of the Hold Steady and Craig Finn. I think to myself, "Man, you are saying exactly what you want to say, all the time. You are bending over backward to make sure that you say it the best way you want to say it." Even that guy is sitting on my sofa going, "Man, we gotta move our shows earlier, because our fans are older and they're paying babysitters."

Everyone wants to be famous for being themselves. Nobody wants to be accountable for that, but everybody wants it. I just admire any artist, even at the beginning, or at the top, or on their way in between, just for continuing to do this. It's nearly impossible. I'm usually the support staff that holds other people up a lot. In that, I learn all the time. Whether I'm holding up one of my partners, or I'm holding up a writer, or I'm holding up another artist, a producer, or whatever, I always learn something. And I've found that it is very hard to ask someone else to help me, because I'm always holding somebody else up, but I'm trying to get better at that. Transferring that information—no matter what side of things you're on—is always a good thing, no matter what.

Kristian Bush Recommends: Things I need to have to make my work

I got a new tattoo. I can't believe I did it, but I finally decided that maybe, this is my job now. 20 million

records later, like, "Holy shit. I guess I'm not really going to go get a day job, so you can finally have a tattoo." My dad has always said don't get tattoos. It was funny. The one that I got, it's a Palomino Blackwing pencil. It's the size of an actual Palomino Blackwing pencil. It runs up my arm, and it looks like it just finished writing something. If you've never seen these pencils, if you've never written with one, get one. Not only do they look cool, they make you feel like what you're writing is a little more important and they write just as fast as a pen.

The entire Tom Waits collection. About the time you think you're any good at this job, always turn on his music and it will remind you that you suck. It will also inspire you. It's not only the characters in his music that's true, it's words that are true, emotions that are true, and recordings that are true. It is the whole package.

There is an app that you use on your phone to help you make music, it's called Figure. I was a swimmer, as a kid. Then I became a swimmer in high school, and then even into college. It is the loneliest exercise on earth, because all you have is the water that's rushing in your ears, and the rhythm of your arms. I learned how to write songs in my head, entire epic albums, while being in the pool for two and a half hours at a time. This program, Figure, I use it almost every day, and I recommend it. It's like, two or three bucks. It's a must-have. I can't live without that.

I would say that everyone deserves a rhyming dictionary, because I literally have two degrees in English, and I still can't get things right. Don't ever be upset, for some reason, that you can't do it on your own. Use a dictionary.

Lastly, I'd say that I have to have the courage to be wrong, and it has to be present almost all the time. I gotta have the courage to do it, so that I can mess up and then correct it. Or, so that I can see what right is. The worst anxiety I would ever have, creatively, is thinking to myself, "That's almost good." Or, "That's almost right." I don't know how many songs I've written at this point in my life—1,500? 1,600?—but I could go back with a highlighter and show you every single space that is the weakest part of every song. If I could go in now, like a mechanic, and put all those songs up on blocks, and go in and fix and tweak all that stuff, those things would be bulletproof. I can do it through recording. I think that's why I like producing, because I can hear where it doesn't make me freak out. Like, when I was a 15-year-old kid, I loved listening to music because I loved the way it made me feel. I can tell you when it's not making me feel something. That's all I do, as a producer. I'm like, "Man, that's awesome. Can you make me feel something different there?" Sometimes I think I'm the weirdest producer on earth.

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Songwriter

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