

On finding strength in limitations



Musician and visual artist Aaron Turner discusses the value of community, doing it yourself, finding inspiration in your surroundings, and making the most of time.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3147 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Education](#), [Process](#).

You're a musical artist and a visual artist. Which came first?

Probably like many children, I started by doing things visually. I don't know if it came naturally or how it was introduced because that predates my memory of my own life. So it's hard to say how much I was encouraged and how much I just gravitated towards drawing and painting. I can say, though, that I was pretty avid in my practice of drawing and painting from an early age. I remember being able to occupy myself for long stretches of time by doing that. And I don't think that was at my parents' behest. I don't think they were just trying to get me to babysit myself with art supplies. I think I was actually compelled to do it.

I think that's probably a thing that many kids go through—and then, at whatever moment, they turn a corner and step away from that. But for me it was continuous. I never stopped drawing and painting. And the older I got, the more time I spent doing that—to the point where I was being admonished by my teachers in class about drawing in my notebook and not paying attention. It was funny, though, because I actually felt like I could listen quite well while drawing. It was easier for me, actually, to pay attention to what was being said in class while I was drawing. And I think that was maybe frustrating for my teachers because they wanted to catch me and prove to the class that I was slacking off. But they'd ask me what we were talking about, and I'd be able to repeat it back verbatim.

When did music come into the picture?

I didn't start playing music right away. I did develop a very active interest in it, which I think took hold in a noticeable way around third grade, so I would've been eight or nine. And I remember what sparked it, too. It was [Beastie Boys'] *Licensed to Ill* and [Mötley Crüe's] *Girls, Girls, Girls*—both on cassette. Those were two of the things that I came across that I actively wanted to listen to. They weren't suggested. I heard them and I wanted to hear more and then began obsessing over them. And shortly after that, maybe a year or two later, I started playing homemade guitars that were just cut out of wood and covered with poster board and splatter paint and had strings made out of twine. That led to the real deal maybe just a year or two later. I guess from maybe third grade to sixth grade, so age nine to age 11 or something like that, is when that transition happened.

When did you make the connection between the two?

I guess maybe around that time, too, is where the connection between visual imagery and music took hold as well, because part of my fascination with heavy metal was probably 45% album cover and 55% music.

I remember being drawn to Kiss and Iron Maiden by the album sleeves alone, before I'd heard any of the music.

Yeah. And it wasn't enough on its own because there were disappointments for me. You mentioned Kiss. I think after I heard Metallica and some other heavier stuff, I saw Kiss's imagery and it had a big impact on me. I remember seeing pictures in *Circus* mag and *Hit Parader* of Gene Simmons with the blood pouring out of his mouth. I thought to myself, "These guys have got to be something else." And then I heard the music and I was like, "This is Kiss? This is ridiculous. Get this away from me." So the music was a huge factor, but the combo was especially potent.

I wonder if I would like Kiss as much as I do if I had heard them after Metallica, like you did. You heard those bands out of order, in a sense—in terms of both chronology and heaviness.

Exactly. There was no going back. I started with some of the sugary stuff, like Crüe and Poison and, but once I heard the trinity of Megadeth, Metallica and Slayer, I could not go back from there.

You grew up in New Mexico. Do you think there was something about that landscape or geography that informed your artistic sensibility?

I'm guessing here, because it seems ambiguous to me to a certain extent—and I don't know how concrete the connection is in what I'm about to say—but I have been attracted to music that sounds huge and I've also been attracted to music that has a lot of space in it. And the New Mexico landscape certainly possesses both those things. There's a sense of limitlessness in looking around the landscape there—the sky is huge, the horizons are wide, the mountains and places are big in scale. So all of that probably did give me some appreciation of those aesthetic qualities, and I made that connection or I found that resonant in the music that I was listening to as well—things that were just overwhelming. I think that limitlessness could also be related to my attraction to a lot of music when it comes to duration. I like things that are long and things that can feel almost infinite in nature.

I think without a doubt people's sensibilities are developed by their immediate environment—socially, geographically, whether you're in a rural or urban place. And that must somehow seep into creative practices later on—or even just seep into what people become attracted to in terms of art they appreciate.

I haven't looked up any studies about this, but it does seem to me that there is something particularly potent about metal as absorbed by people who live in more rural environments or in smaller towns and smaller scenes. I remember hearing that from some touring bands that came through New Mexico before I moved away from there. They said, "Audiences here are much smaller, but they're also much more ferocious." And I definitely perceived that in the people I was around as well, who were just completely and utterly devoted to a life that was centered around music and specifically around metal, at least in the early years, and a little later on around punk and hardcore.

If Metallica, Slayer and Megadeth drew you into that world, who were the bands that gave you that feeling of, "I can do this"? Because that's different than appreciating the advanced skills of those three—at least when you're starting out.

Yeah. I didn't understand, when I first picked up guitar, that trying to learn music by those bands was going to be a stretch. I didn't understand that I couldn't just make the leap from no knowledge to this elevated practice of guitar shredding. So I struggled away trying to ham-fistedly play those things and it came slowly over time. I think I even had aspirations very early on of making my life in music and in visual art, but it didn't seem tangible to me until I started getting into punk and hardcore and the DIY circuit that was embedded within those things. And it also wasn't a revelatory flash where it all came to me at once. It was a slow-dawning realization that I pieced together after looking at zines and trading letters with people and starting to mail-order records and seeing a few local bands, as well the few touring bands that came through. Eventually, it became clear to me that all of the people doing these things that I was really getting into were basically in the same position I was in. Perhaps a few years older in some instances, but not by much.

I think that all started to fall together for me around age 15 or 16, so when I was a junior in high school. The

most striking example for me locally was the band Logical Nonsense, who did a couple records on Alternative Tentacles, recorded with Billy Anderson and toured nationally, including opening for Neurosis. Their music, the trajectory they were on, and then also basically the information that they brought back with them from these experiences was very instructional and inspirational. There was something that intrigued me about the fact that there was very clearly a community energy that was part of the driving force behind this. It was not only that I could be a participant, but it was that I was joining into something that was a through-line connecting a bunch of different people and places altogether.

You mentioned the DIY aspect that plays such a huge part in that community. You've been a DIY person from the beginning—starting your own record label, doing your own artwork, your own layouts, all that stuff. A lot of people fall into that situation by necessity, but you actually wanted to handle almost every aspect of your output, right?

Absolutely. And this goes back to my interest in the album covers that I first came across in third and fourth grade. I was diligently copying those things in pencil on the back of my notebook and studying them. And then it occurred to me later, when I realized that releasing records myself or doing zines or whatever it was, gave me an outlet not only to do my drawing and painting, but also to share that stuff with other people. It seemed to make a lot of sense to me that—for instance—if a band was going to have an album cover that was to represent their music, who better would understand what the band was trying to communicate than a person who was actually in that band as a participant?

When it came time for me to actually start designing things, of course I liked doing it for other bands as well, but I especially enjoyed doing it for my own bands. I felt like I was able to present a unified vision from top to bottom, which felt very empowering. For a person who was not comfortable communicating verbally in a lot of ways, being able to get ideas across and connect with other people through those means was very satisfying.

You went to art school at SMFA in Boston. What did you get out of that experience?

I got a lot of free time to write music and design album sleeves and not be bogged down by academics. I'm joking in part, but part of the reason I chose the school I went to was because it didn't have an academic program. For better or for worse, that did give me more time to do things like band practice and a mail-order distro and taking that distro to shows and traveling out of state to see shows in neighboring cities. And I think that was very important because part of how I ended up on the path that I'm on was through making all the connections that came out of that. Had I just been confined to Boston and doing homework and not looking out quite so much, I don't know that I would've been able to arrive at all the conclusions I did through traveling to New York and spending so much time sending records to people and getting records in return.

So I don't know that art school played a pivotal role in terms of what I learned there, but it did play a pivotal role in terms of what opportunities I was afforded by being there at that time. I don't want to completely disavow my experience at the school itself because I did get to practice art there in a structured environment, which at times was very helpful for me. And I did a lot of painting there, some of which ended up being used for artwork for things I released or some of that early Converge stuff, for instance. I got to learn some printmaking techniques, which expanded my vocabulary in terms of tools that I could use, as well as just being able to see things differently.

I also had a couple of teachers who were very helpful. One in particular, who I think was very wary of the dogmatic aspect of school, opened my eyes to the fact that schools want to push students in a particular way, either to make them viable in the marketplace or to create a certain kind of reputation for the school itself. His whole premise was basically, "Do what you feel most compelled to do, and don't pay attention to what people are telling you that you should be doing." That was very liberating for me, and it actually helped me push myself forward pretty quickly with my painting and drawing.

Many of the album sleeves, t-shirt designs and poster designs you create tend to fall under the umbrella of abstract artwork. What do you think draws you to that style?

Well, my own limitations to a certain degree. But also just trying to capture feeling and representing that in what I feel is the most direct way possible. The practical aspect of it—and this is true for me in music as well—is that studying the technical aspects of the craft were frustrating for me. I felt like learning scales and trying to read sheet music or going to anatomy and life drawing classes was impeding my ability to make something. Because I was really compelled by wanting to make things. I felt like what I needed to get out, what I needed to externalize creatively, could happen at any time that I was willing to give that impulse an outlet. So being bogged down by learning how the skeleton was put together, or by trying to learn how to read sheet music, just made me feel like I was being stymied. It made me feel like I was wasting an opportunity I had to be making something—by doing something that didn't ultimately feel that important to me.

Again, there are times when I have regrets about not learning those things or about not being a little bit more diligent in my studies. I would like to be able to draw the human form in a more accurate way. At the same time, that regret is pretty minuscule in comparison to the satisfaction I've gained from making the work that I've made. And the same goes for music. I don't know that I would've made music that is drastically different from what I've ended up making if I knew all the technical aspects of how to write music, how to read music, and so forth.

Do you feel that the gaps in your knowledge or technical ability possibly helped you create the music and art you've created?

I think they have less often been a hindrance and more often been a strength. I don't know what my trajectory would've been had I gone a more academic route either with music or with art. However, if I look back to my late teenage years and think about what I was hoping to achieve when I was that age, I'm there now. That's not to say that I've done everything I've wanted to do, but I'm on the path I hoped that I would be. And when I think about the music and in some cases the visual art that has had the biggest impact on me, most of it has been made by people who did not possess that technical training.

I think that there is a freedom of thought that can come out of that lack of training. There is a willingness to experiment that is perhaps broader because it hasn't been solidified in any particular direction by a particular school of thought or a particular approach or any of those kinds of things. So yeah, I think I am who I am because of those gaps in my technical knowledge of my craft.

Just to backtrack a little bit, part of the reason I make stuff that's abstract a lot of the time—and I think this applies to some of the music as well—is because I feel like that is the most direct form that my interior energy can take. To try to twist it into a shape that's more recognizable on a figurative level is uninteresting to me and actually feels counter to what I hope to get across. When I try to confine my ideas into shapes that are perhaps more recognizable or conventional or figurative, I find the results to be completely uninteresting.

At present, you have at least two bands that record and tour fairly consistently. You have a family—a wife and child—and a record label. And you always seem to be working on art and other musical projects. What kind of tips can you offer about time management?

No amount of time spent working on something is ever too little. I have found that to be especially true after becoming a parent. Both [my wife] [Faith \[Coloccia\]](#) and I have squandered our time as adults when we could have been actually making something. But we didn't realize that until after we had a child. We both slapped ourselves on the forehead once the work of parenting became clear and we thought about all the time we had spent doing whatever the fuck it was we did before we had a kid. And now we lament the fact that we very rarely can sit down for hours at a time to work on a musical idea.

But we've also learned how sitting down, even if it's just for five minutes to play our instruments, is of value. I really try to follow that as a guideline in the five years since I became a dad. If I get to the end of the day, even if I feel completely worn out and I don't feel like I've got it in me, and I know I need to go to bed by a certain hour because my kid's going to be up by a certain hour—even if it's only for five minutes—I will do it. It may not be that I write anything. It may not be that anything comes of it other than I am in contact with my instrument and I am using my body and my spirit and my mind to direct my energy in that way. And that's worth it.

Aaron Turner Recommends:

Jerusalem In My Heart - Qalag

Alan Moore Conversations, edited by Eric L. Berlatsky

Mortiferum - Preserved In Torment (and seeing them live)

The Bug - Fire

Unconditional Parenting by Alfie Kohn

Name

Aaron Turner

Vocation

musician and artist

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Faith Coloccia