

On putting in the time



Musician and visual artist Ernest Greene (Washed Out) discusses reacting in the moment, absorbing others' art, and making physical space for creativity.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2278 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Family](#).

I first heard of your music around when I first heard of Spotify and streaming. As streaming has become dominant over the course of your career, how have you had to adjust in order to make a living from your art, especially now that you're supporting a family?

I don't feel like I've fallen into any kind of traps in terms of feeding the beast of constantly—I feel like I've heard [Spotify's] CEO say that the old model of releasing an album, touring the album, then taking a few years off is just not how music is made, released, or distributed anymore. He was basically implying that there needs to be this constant stream of output, which is not the way my process works at all. There's quite a bit of experimenting from album to album, and I'm trying to reinvent my sound in a lot of ways between album projects, so that takes a lot of time.

There's been some pretty big gaps between my releases. Some come quicker than others. I'm fearful every time I release an album after taking a three- or four-year break that my audience will have disappeared or moved on. So far, that hasn't been the case, but I'm lucky that some of my older material has somewhat stood the test of time and is still put on editorial playlists and gets a decent amount of plays. I've been a little bit protected in that way.

I'd love to hear more about that fear and how you squash it.

Ultimately, my albums are a little bit of a diary of my own life. It's whatever I'm interested in, whatever I'm listening to—that all seeps into what the album becomes. In some ways, the audience, I'm not really thinking so much about that. I guess there is maybe a Washed Out sound at this point, and the real challenge is continuing to move forward and try new things, but still holding onto whatever it is that makes it a Washed Out album. In some ways, that's really the only way I'm considering the audience. I just spend a lot of time making the best work that I can make, and then I figure everything else out after that.

How much has having a family caused you to view your art, your creativity, as a 9-to-5? How has your creative schedule and capacity for creative work changed?

I've always been quite obsessive about my music, and about thinking about music. Before I had kids, that would mean having a hard time ever turning it off and just working around the clock. When the kids came around, there's a lot of limitations in terms of their schedule. That aspect was a healthy one where I do confine my work schedule into the normal 9-to-5. Before 9:00, I'm waking up early and getting [the kids] ready for school and that sort of thing. After 5:00, it's a lot of the activities that they're into. It's a good thing that it sort of creates a hard reset and gives me other things to be thinking about and considering.

I'd love to hear more about how working within roughly the same timeframe each day on your music versus working

around the clock has changed your process and how you feel about the final product.

I think just having that stepping-away from—I literally leave. I have a separate workspace, and I don't even bring the computer with me back home at the end of the day. That was a problem before having kids, where, if the computer or means of working is just an arm's length away, it's always there. Hopefully, I get some insight from taking breaks and having other concerns in my life, or just maybe a little more perspective.

As far as my day-to-day, I'm not the type that needs to be inspired to work. If anything, it's the opposite. I just show up every day and make things. Over a long enough period, stuff just seems to take shape. I don't stress too hard about any goals or anything. It's more just putting in the time, and that's my main concern.

If I'm understanding you right, because you're working at roughly the same time each day and going in—not necessarily with pre-built inspiration, but just going in to create—writer's block isn't really something you face.

Well, that's interesting. I've been grappling with writer's block, and it's not what I originally thought writer's block to be. I thought writer's block meant not having any ideas, which—I've been doing this long enough and feel like I'm skilled enough as a producer that I can sort of manifest and make practically anything that I want, in a way. My problem that I struggle with on every album to some degree is coming up with ideas that check all the boxes in the back of my mind. That was more of a challenge [in [*Notes from a Quiet Life*](#)].

I figured out a palette of sounds that I wanted to use, which is an important step in my process, but I just couldn't quite put everything together and write the songs that I wanted to write. That was a version of writer's block, I think. The only way for me to work through that is to make a ton of experiments. I made over 150 demos for this project, and it's just the sheer repetition and waiting for the magic to happen, or even a happy accident. Stumbling into something just takes that repetition for me.

I'd love to hear more about what you said about creating a palette of sounds, especially in the way of, has that been how you've built that signature Washed Out sound? I ask this knowing that you're changing sounds between albums but still, at least in my opinion, staying within a general sound.

I think there's a couple of different levels. There's my natural taste and sensibility that probably, regardless of whatever instrument it is or whatever sound palette, it'll come out as a little bit of the Washed Out sound. On each project, I'm trying to do something I've never done before but still maintaining some form or faction of my own sound. It's a process of listening to a bunch of music and trying out tons of ideas, most of which probably are complete failures. Eventually, I'll settle upon something like a palette that seems right. It's mostly an intuitive kind of thing. On each album, there's an instrument or something that, very much, the album is sort of built around.

I've been told that you have plans to create large-scale visual works of art, and I'm not aware of you having any visual art background even though *Mister Mellow* was a visual album. What motivated you to take the leap into this new creative realm? How did you become confident enough to do so?

It's been a gradual process. I've always put the album artwork together for all my records, whether shooting photos or [creating] graphic design elements and all of that. I didn't understand much of that process until starting the process of putting my artwork together. There's so many things beyond just making the music when it comes to releasing music. For me, the artwork is important, and music videos or press photos are ways of telling the story of what the album is about. My albums are very thought-out and, in some ways, like a world-building exercise where everything hopefully connects together and creates this picture of what this sonic universe is about.

As I've gotten older, my love for art has gotten deeper and deeper. Probably five, six, seven years ago, I started spending less time going to bars and stuff after the shows on tour and instead waking up early—I love going to museums. I've educated myself a lot more on art history, and [I'm] constantly reading and researching online. It naturally led to trying my own visual experiments. I don't consider myself a real artist or anything. It's mainly

for myself.

I've moved to a property in rural Georgia that's like 20 acres, and I've slowly been working on various projects here. Nothing commercial at all. It's just for my own enjoyment. I'm a big fan of sculpture gardens in general, something like Storm King Art Center in upstate New York. I'd like to build my own small little version of that here.

It sounds like you're the kind of person who can just fall in love with a type of creative output and learn to do it yourself. Does that parallel how you started making music way back when?

Oh yeah, 100 percent. I have no real training at all in music theory or recording or anything like that. It's just been a gradual process of trial and error. Over the last 10 years, YouTube has become more of a resource in that way. I'm constantly learning new things from random YouTube tutorials, and that's what keeps it fresh and fun. I'm not really interested in ever doing the same thing twice, so any kind of new technique or piece of gear that I can incorporate and hopefully do some new things with is very exciting.

How do you start a project? How do you know when it's done? Both for music, which you're releasing commercially, and visual art, which is just for you.

That's tough. At this point, with both visual art and music, I've done it enough where it's very much this flow state where I'm not really thinking about any technical stuff. I'm just putting one thing down, and that leads to the next thing, and then you're off to the races. There's very little rationalization or any real plan, especially at the very beginning of the project. It's literally just trying things to see where I can end up. As an album project starts shaping up, there's a handful of songs or maybe...there's some parameters in place, and you're working within that.

The visual art is, in some ways, the exact opposite of a Washed Out album. I think of a Washed Out album as very detail-oriented, particularly with this new album, because I was going for a really hi-fi sound. I was really concentrating on capturing things as clearly as possible and, in terms of mixing, making sure every sound was in the right place in the stereo field and things like that, whereas [my visual] art is much more free-flowing and literally just making a mark, and then the next mark is just a reaction to the first mark, and then on and on. It's more about just riding the wave. There's certain music practices I have that mirror that as well. I make a lot of ambient music, and that's more improvisations with just a handful of layers. I'm not stressing so much about capturing things perfectly. It's just reacting in the moment.

As you began working in visual art, how did you build on what you already knew about creativity as a musician?

What I learned from my experience with Washed Out was just the research that goes into a project. I can be quite obsessive, and I think my biggest strength is just my curiosity. I just will go above and beyond to find new inspiration, or if there's something I'm interested in, [I'll find] every little bit of information about it. By the time I'm getting around to actually putting pen to paper or making something, there's already a ton of ideas in the back of my mind. I've definitely approached my visual art practice in that same way where there were literally years of thinking about what I liked and what I didn't like and being obsessed with this or that artist. That gave me a background for when I started. I knew some of the things I wanted to try, and then [I worked it] out in real-time.

Swinging back around to the 20-acre farm, I was wondering how the settings in which you create visual art and music differ. What's your ideal creative setting?

To some degree, I don't think it matters where I'm at. I've made work crammed in a tour bus, a van, or a plane. But I will say, for my album projects, it's very helpful just having a space to go to every day to focus. Where I'm at currently in my life and where I live now, this private rural space, I think it's more for my lifestyle outside of music. It's what I'm into at the moment and what works for me and my family right now.

I grew up in a small town not very far from here, and in a lot of ways, I was wanting my kids to—I felt like they might flourish in that same setting versus a really busy, urban, hustle-and-bustle kind of culture. [At] the same time, I don't think I would have focused as much on my visual practice if I didn't have the space I have now. I have room to have separate studios, and I have an outdoor workshop. That sort of stuff never would've happened at our older homes in urban areas.

Ernest Greene recommends these documentaries:

Imaginary Landscapes (1989) about Brian Eno

Gonzalo Fonseca (2019)

Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth series

Victim of the Brain (1988) about Douglas Hofstadter

Mindfulness: Be Happy Now about Thich Nhat Hanh

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□

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