On creating only for yourself

Musician and visual designer Mattiel Brown discusses overcoming nervousness and fears of failure, silencing others' expectations, and finding potential collaborators in everyone you meet.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2195 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Day jobs, Process, Independence, Money.

You lead the charge on vinyl foldouts and artwork fonts for Mattiel's albums. Can you talk about how visual presentation plays into how you create music and vice versa?

I learned [a lot from] a creative director named Ron Lewis at Mailchimp. I was very young when I started as an in-house designer there, and I was afraid of failure and didn't know how good I was, or wasn't, at what I was doing. Ron trusted me and taught me a lot of things, one of which was, "Don't be afraid of failure. Go ahead into something and don't be afraid if it's going to be bad. You have to make the bad pancakes before you can get something good." So I followed that playbook when I was making things like billboards, ads, and magazines for the company. And it was a really fun job. It sounds boring, speaking about it as a corporate job, but we had a lot of freedom, and we did a lot of things that never made it to print, and they just let us fuck around.

I was doing that when I was 20, and at the same time, I was thinking about recording myself singing and writing songs. I found someone in Atlanta who was making the sort of music I might want to [make]. It was just a side project and another creative outlet at the time because I was going to work every single day, and I wanted something else a bit more free. That's how I met Jonah [Swilley, of Mattiel] at a studio session, and we started to work together.

I was really nervous about singing in front of anybody. A lot of the things I learned at Mailchimp informed how I approached music without as much fear. Saying all that makes me sound like I was a really anxious person and really afraid. I think I was. I was really concerned about not being good enough, and I've left a lot of that behind now.

And then, vice versa, I don't plan out any of the album artwork beforehand. The music all comes first. [For *Georgia Gothic*, which] Jonah and I exclusively wrote together, I didn't come up with the artwork until many months after everything had been recorded and mastered and I could look at it and see what it was in its own context.

So it's less of a thing of, "This skill that I learned in visual design is something I can apply to music," and more like, "All the philosophies and mental processes I learned from doing visual design, I can bring to music."

Yeah, definitely. And making something out of nothing, approaching something and knowing what parts of your brain to turn on and what parts to ignore. It's like, "Don't overthink it, but you should think about this, but don't worry about that so much."

Over time, as more people have started to pay attention [to Mattiel], I find myself having to put myself into more of a child-like mindset, the way I was when I was writing the first record, to not have any outside

influence fucking with what I'm trying to do. I feel the same way about any visual work that I've done, which I thought was going to be my whole career. I wasn't 15 thinking that I was going to be a singer.

I'm curious if you can talk more about some of these expectations that you have to shut out and how you go about doing so.

If I'm going into the writing room to write a song with Jonah or I'm sitting down and carving a linoleum block, either way, if I'm thinking about what someone's going to think while I'm doing that, then I'm already doing it wrong. There has to be an isolated environment that's totally dedicated to that one thing you're doing.

Now that you're pursuing music full-time, how did you come to the conclusion that, as much as you love visual design, you were willing to ditch a stable nine-to-five in it to pursue music?

I had a tipping point where I had saved enough money and felt like it wouldn't be a super irresponsible thing for me to go and chase this, and that was in 2019. I mean, half my time is spent doing visual work for this. If there's an ad that goes out on social media, I'm putting that together in Premiere Pro. I'm doing all the little stupid things that are usually delegated to other people. … My day-to-day is inundated with that work, so I'm still doing it, but I'm just doing it for us instead of a big tech company.

Does it ever start to feel like work again?

It feels really good when you're doing it for your own project. So it's work, but I've worked my whole life. I have a good work ethic, Jonah has a very good work ethic, and we relate in that way. And he's kind of the mastermind of the music and production and has spent his whole career perfecting that art. And that's why we make such a good team. He can handle that, and I can handle all the aesthetic elements.

You're talking about this in a way that almost equates the aesthetic elements with the music. And I feel like for some musicians, even broaching that suggestion might be passe.

Yeah. It's really important to me. And I think it's important for everybody…both things are incredibly important.

How do the ways that you want people to react to your music and your visual design look different?

I don't spend too much time thinking about how I want people to react. I just want to make stuff that I like. And I'm inspired by a lot of things that are visually appealing to me, and I have my own set of inspirations and mood boards that go into the music videos and album artwork. I wasn't thinking about how it was going to be received while I was thinking up the idea for the [*Georgia Gothic*] album cover of us with the red leather and the pitchforks. It was just a thing that popped into my head, and I ran with it.

When you say the mood board, is it figuratively living in your head, like a mental thing, or is there a visible mood board that you draw from?

It depends. Sometimes, I can just keep it all in my head, but it helps to communicate the idea to other people when I put it down on paper. That's probably what I should be doing more of. [For] "Blood in the Yolk," I [came up with] the video [idea] and drew inspiration from a film called *The Color of Pomegranates*, which is a 1969 surrealist film by the director Sergei Parajanov. I put together a whole bunch of stills from that film that I wanted to pay homage to or recreate in my own way in the studio.

I called up our friend, David Swanson, who's Jack White's right-hand man. He took all these amazing, intimate photographs of the White Stripes in the early 2000s. We met him on tour in 2018. I asked him if he wanted to help frame up the film because he's a photographer. I felt like he would be really great at it, and he nailed it and totally understood my idea from the beginning.

When I first learned that you, the front person of Mattiel, are also responsible for the visual elements, my mind

defaulted to "Oh, so you must direct the music videos." But I now know that it's more of, you have a role in the typefaces and things like the consistently red, Gothic fonts.

I'm really neurotic about how everything appears and looks, and I've always been that way. Even if I wasn't making something with my name slapped on it, whenever I was delivering things to the marketing team at [Mailchimp], I was…I mean, I wouldn't submit something I didn't like, because I didn't want to be known for something that I didn't think was good. I think I'm just trying to impress myself most of the time, and if other people like it, that's a bonus. I'm very grateful if they do.

Jason Travis directed [the "Lighthouse"] video, and I worked with Jason at Mailchimp for many years, and we had a desk next to each other and are huge collaborators in life. We're very close and I trust him more than a lot of people in this world with that kind of job.

A lot of musicians, when they first enter the industry, might say to their label or their management, "Who can help me with this? Help me find somebody." You already know the people. Can you talk about the value of your connections with your community and how they affect your art?

I think it saves the record company some money, and it's just really fast and efficient to do that. But I will say, I remember being 19 years old, I was working in a clothing store in Atlanta, and I would meet a lot of different people. A lot of really weird people would walk in, and I was working there alone. I was doing a job and I was trying to sell clothes to people, which meant that I had to talk to everybody as soon as they walked into the store. I'm usually an introverted, agoraphobic type of person, but I had to talk to people for that job.

Over time, I got this motto in my head that every single person you meet, no matter who it is, is worth remembering and engaging with…just really, truly valuing your experience with every single person you meet. That's helped me connect, and find common ground, with all the people that I happen to be around.

You grew up on a goat farm, and some people might associate visual design and music with sprawling cities. I'm curious how your rural background has affected how you create art.

I was an only child, so I had a lot of time to be isolated. My parents didn't have cable TV until I was 15. We had, like, 10 channels on the TV. I didn't have a lot of the mid-'90s, early 2000s exposure to pop culture [that] a lot of my friends did. I didn't even realize that until I would go to a friend's house, and they'd be playing the Spice Girls, and I'd be like, "What is this?"

My mother had me when she was 42. She was working in the film industry at the time. She's a super creative person and really talented but didn't give a shit about pop culture and exposing me to it. I had to make up my own shit. That was probably a good thing…my mind had space to be creative, and I…was influenced by things that were not necessarily of the time I was growing up in. I got exposed to whatever my parents liked, which was only a handful of things. It was an isolated environment on the farm, and I wouldn't have [had] it any other way.

My mom is a huge influence on all this stuff. I don't know if I'd be anywhere near as good at visual art now if it weren't for learning from her my whole life. She went to an arts high school in Detroit in the '60s. She was in New York from 1969 to 1985. She had this super artistic life and worked in the film industry for a couple of decades and started working in Georgia because they were filming a series here called *In the Heat of the Night*. She worked on B movies and *Remember the Titans*. She did a lot of prop work on that film, and I remember being eight years old and watching her do that.

All that creative work was happening at home, too. For *Remember the Titans*, she had to make these prop ice cream cones out of styrofoam that wouldn't melt during the film. I remember watching her do that and being intrigued. She's a painter, she's not involved in music, but her sisters and parents are all musicians in some way. So music is in the family, but she's more of a visual artist. She would never sugarcoat anything for me either. If I had to do a school project or deliver something for college or write a paper…for AP Lit in 10th grade, it had to be damn good because my mom was not going to let it slide if it wasn't, and I appreciate her for that. That's my long answer about my mom. She's great.

Mattiel Brown Recommends:

Any song by Amadou and Miriam

Roadrunner (posthumous documentary about Anthony Bourdain)

Lost in Translation (a fav film)

The Alpinist (doc about free climbing)

ZZ Top - "Got Me Under Pressure"

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