

# On money and creative work



Musician Caleb Cordes (Sinai Vessel) discusses coming to terms with not making a living from your artistic output.

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As told to Tyler Bussey, 3002 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Money](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Time management](#), [Inspiration](#).

**I want to start by asking about how the themes of the new record came together, and specifically how the theme of money emerged?**

Well, I'm in Nashville right now, which is a good place to be answering this question, because it's where I wrote the record. And it's the setting of me coming to terms with, I don't know, financial realities, the reality of living under capitalism. It's also the place in which I encountered, both in my peer group and in the wider world, the kind of brutal influence of wealth. So, the confluence of those two things happening, plus the pandemic, and having the kind of motion of my life as a musician that was just making ends meet halted, was cause for a giant existential reflection. And seeing other people have the margins to react differently to how life was becoming increasingly difficult was a big influence on me reflecting on my circumstances, and was cause for a lot of fear and anxiety growing.

I think the conduit of music serves different emotions in different people. For me, it often serves to release some anxiety or fear. That's often something that I write about. And it really felt good to begin daring to address the taboo subject of money in songs. And yeah, I think one thing that attracts me to songwriting and to other people's songs is if I'm hearing a song that's written about something that I've never heard a song be written about before.

Money is often one of those things. There's a handful of people who have given me that permission in their songs, and inspired me. But it felt like a really liberating subject to write about just because I really needed to address it. And also because it felt like I was in territory that was kind of on my own.

This feels like the most tangible record lyrically in that some of it is quite anecdotal. Every time that I would include a lyric that felt like it cataloged something that happened in my real life and a theme that I was feeling in my day-to-day going-about, I felt a lot of peace and almost like I had been able to see myself. I don't think that it was something that I planned and thought about beforehand. So with respect to how it played out, it seems that it just needed to happen.

**We were kids when we first got into music. But we don't necessarily relate to what's going on in the music then, it's almost like a fantasy world or an escapist kind of thing. I'm curious if you can chart the journey towards your songwriting being a little bit more grounded in real life, grounded in self-expression?**

I think me writing in this way has to do with me growing up as a person and as a listener. My earlier writing was definitely much more impressionistic. I don't think that I knew myself as well or sort of had concrete edges from which to establish a way to talk about myself, or a way to talk about what I was experiencing.

But as life just became gradually more real to me, and the things that people experience at large became more

real to me, it became not only more necessary to write about them, but just was imperative to write about them. I'm sometimes not sure what else I could write about.

**There's that image in "Dollar"—"in the bathroom at the house show/ checking my credit score"—that I feel really encapsulates the absurdity of trying to reconcile...I'm wondering if you feel like making art or music and making money are at odds on some level? Or if the idea of trying to hold those two things at the same time feels contradictory in some way?**

It's so different for each person and figuring out how to answer both of those problems at once. The problems being the need to survive, and also a perennial desire to make art and to express myself via that medium. I don't think that they're necessarily opposed. I mean, there's many examples of people in my life who have figured out a way to do both. I think for me, this record is addressing that the present ratio of energy I dedicate to those two things is not working. And because it's not working, it feels somewhat opposed. You just realize how little capital and money exists inside a certain sphere, and you put all of your eggs into that certain sphere and it doesn't feel like there's enough to sustain you. There's the whole joke about all of our peers sending each other the same \$20. And yeah, that's what it feels like at times.

I often have a grass-is-greener kind of conversation with people at shows who are either non-musicians or non-practicing artists, or just people that practice music as a hobby who look at my life or how they perceive my life to be. And they're like, "Man, I really wish that I had been spending as much time as you on art and on a life in making music." And they feel bad because they have some sort of primary vocation that they've dedicated most of their energy to that now sustains them. And I have precisely the inverse desire, or the inverse regret, that I've not set myself up to be able to have something that sustains me outside of music. And now I'm quite envious of that.

I wish that I had more examples or more people telling me sobering truths in my life, that these two things aren't opposed. That you can work on a vocation and develop a career and also lead a very fulfilling artistic life simultaneously. One doesn't have to be sacrificed for the other. And now I think that I'm trying to set that balance for myself.

**The new record, a lot of it is you grappling without really answering the question "Why do this, what is the point of art?" Kind of looking at creativity in an unromantic and critical way. A lot of the time we talk to artists, we're looking for techniques or ways to get more in the creative zone, and not a lot of it addresses the idea of "What if art-making is compulsory and unhealthy, or what if it has become that for you?"**

Right, absolutely.

**I'm curious if you arrived at any takeaways with that for yourself, or if the takeaway was just to bring up the question?**

I think that I'm seeing other songwriters do this. I don't think that by any means I'm the only one, but for a long time maybe the pain of compulsory art-making is just sort of this thing that gets suffered along the way of making art, and it rarely enters the realm of making art itself. People historically seem to have treated the pain or difficulty of making something as a sunk cost to making the thing and rarely does the thing that they made address how difficult it was to get to that point.

I think that my answer to the question has just kind of been to perforate that boundary a little bit. The record doesn't really provide any answers, and I think maybe before I put some pressure on myself to come around to a point. And now I feel like the point has not been to provide an answer, but just simply to express, because I don't think that these themes are necessarily going to let up, but they do become more manageable if I don't have to hold them alone.

**Yeah. Did it strike you as a challenge to not let that become nihilistic, though?**

Oh, yeah, for sure. I mean, I think that there also is a good amount of...not a cauterized nihilism, in the sense

that it's like these things absolutely don't matter, more nihilism as a quick tool for releasing control or just letting go of pain and not trying to solve it, but acknowledging it as something that's going to be felt. Not trying to bend it into something that could be a lesson or will have a big takeaway, but it's just something that's going to hurt and will pass.

**Success and failure are very loaded and ambiguous concepts, especially when you're talking about the arc of a career or something. I'm curious about how you either define or navigate the notion of success and whether it's achievable or something else, creatively or otherwise.**

I think the goal, of course, is to always be addressing it from an artistic perspective, whether I accomplished the artistic and aesthetic goals that I set out to explore. Did I explore them fully? Did I add something new to my tool belt, did I cover new ground? And that feels like the most sustainable way to gauge success, just in terms of honestly, how much fun did I have? Did I get to go to the place that I wanted to take my artistic vehicle to? Did I discover something new about myself and my own capabilities? That seems like the best way to measure it.

I will say that after having done it for as long as I have and being exposed to just the wild litany of ways that art making can go in respect to career and lifestyle, of course it gets way more complicated than that, and I'm tempted to grade my experience in it by some other inherited metrics of success. But as a friend told me recently, you can't beat yourself up for not winning the lottery.

**You're someone I know who has self-released, has ponied up to get your own records pressed. And in a lot of ways I found it inspiring that you worked your ass off in order to make that happen and provided a good example of, if you want to do it by yourself, you can make it happen.**

Yeah, totally. I think that it's been about the making of a record and the enjoyment of that process, not something that's necessitated by demand from the outside world. But rather just a gift to myself that I get to enjoy. And I think that, barring some kind of outlandish or unusual circumstance where the work is commissioned or somebody wants me to make a record and is willing to pay for it, it will remain that way from this point forward. And I am granting myself an opportunity to collaborate and to make something that exists in my head manifest. And that has been such a fulfilling gift that I think is worth my own financial and work-hours expense. Just because it's something that I find so fulfilling, and I think that I am really grateful for the opportunity to have endured a lack of opportunity, to make it for myself in spite of these things not coming together.

Simply because I've just realized that I can, that it's possible. And that if it means something to me to see that process through, I can do it independent of any sort of demand. And that it doesn't feel bad either. I mean it can, but it depends on how much you're investing into it becoming a product rather than just a manifest work of art and how much you have hopes for it becoming something that's going to be gainful. But yeah, I feel really lucky to have had tangible experiences of making that happen for myself and just being able to mentally categorize that art-making is something that I can invest in that just makes me happy. And to do it beyond just this sort of simple recording and publishing of the music. Every part of it is really nourishing to me: designing the package that it's going to come in, collaborating with people along the way of making a kind of campaign. Those things are exciting and nourishing to me in and of themselves.

**I'm wondering: you decided recently to put an end to Sinai Vessel as the name of your project. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about what that means and why, and what that means going forward?**

I think that as I've grown older and the existential imperative of what the hell I'm going to do with my life has become a pressure that has bore down on me more and more, I have definitely used my pursuit of playing music inside Sinai Vessel to answer it for a long time. That's because of several factors. One, because I believed in it, and two, because there was no other kind of competing vocation that was being offered to me. It was an arena for me to generate the job that I wanted to have, or maybe to dress for the job that I wanted to have. And I feel like I've been dressing for that job for a really long time. And the project has become kind of invariably associated with ambition for me, and a name by which to organize my efforts to, I don't know, achieve some sort of career.

I think the desire has taken the shape of being able to get the consistent opportunity to make stuff in a way that doesn't feel purely self-generated. Like being invited to play shows rather than purely booking them yourself or having resources by which to make things rather than having to generate those resources alone. I've not desired some extraordinary amount of fame so much as I have desired just the opportunity to make things and to play music without having to work so hard at things that don't have anything to do with making music. And that just hasn't happened, plainly.

I think that, for me, it's become associated with an ambition to kind of reach the next rung. And the amount of energy that I put into that factor has kind of returned to me void enough times for it to feel like, if I'm to keep doing that with that mindset, then I think that it's going to make a lot of things deteriorate in my life, and already has. I think that I would be a much more kind and generous and unselfish person if I wasn't dedicating so much energy towards that thing. And yeah, I just wanted to try leaning into the answer that my experience was giving me, was that that particular ambition is unlikely to happen. And it's returned void enough for it to be a theme. And I would like to try ransoming my artistic practice and enjoyment of music and participation in music communities out of that kind of stale ambition before it really harms it.

**You were telling people [on tour] that Sinai Vessel has become a place to put all the kinds of music you want to make. Do you, I guess outside of making music for...I keep wanting to say vessel [laughs]. But is the idea that you feel like you don't need the name anymore to do the thing that you were doing for the name?**

Yeah, absolutely. I think so. I mean, the reason why I was holding onto that particular name for so long was just that it, for better or for worse, had been granted some opportunities. It had existed as a calling card for long enough. And I think that now I just don't want to hold onto it thinking that that is the only vessel by which I'm going to enjoy those opportunities, or just making music in general. I don't need to funnel it all through that. And in a way I want to prove to myself that it doesn't have to be through that name and that I don't have to answer to the thing that I've made. Because yeah, it's weirdly an experience that I think has kept me somewhat isolated and unable to relate to so many of the musicians around me who are starting new things all the time..The territory that I want to explore with art is to make something without any pre-existing context or pre-existing favor.

I'm trying to end something that is itself just like an imaginary thing. It's an abstraction. So, to talk about its end, I mean, nothing changes, you know what I mean?

**Right. It's like when you realize that Santa Claus isn't real.**

[laughs] Right. Yeah, yeah, totally.

**Caleb Cordes Recommends:**

Admitting defeat is underrated. Can't watch the tape while you're still playing. The game has to end, perspective is everything, et cetera. I'm trying out giving up and I've never felt better.

The expanded universe of the label [Tasty Morsels](#) and the general output of the musician [Rory McCarthy](#) (Infinite Bisous, etc.) has been a consistent source of musical and logistical inspiration. It's music that is wholly unconcerned with all the things that tend to ruin music, both in spirit and in practice. Plus, it's very good.

It's a real trope, this musician-in-his-thirties-discovers-he's-in-possession-of-a-body type shit, but running around on city roads and forest trails has saved my life. It's likely to continue to. Buy a pair of nice shoes and go see.

If you've maintained an art practice for any length of time, it can be useful to contextualize doing normal things as an artistic practice, too. I know this sounds stupid, but I believe that curiosity can serve a person well outside of the process of making things. I'm presently in an album cycle of comprehending how to find and maintain a job, for example.

Novel territory, I know: I love loving a person. That rules. There's not much that's better or more worthy of your time than actively working out how to add to someone else's life.

Name

Caleb Cordes

Vocation

songwriter and musician

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