On focusing on what it is you're making

Musician Chad Matheny (Emperor X) discusses using the tools you have, saying yes, making things complicated, and being a try-hard.

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As told to Ty Maxwell, 3131 words.

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You said earlier, "Say yes to everything for 20 years and be sure that you're good."

Yeah, that's right. Say yes to everything for 20 years and be sure that you're good. And then, people will ask you to do the things that you're currently begging to get the chance to do.

Can you elaborate on what that means to you, knowing that you're good?

I think it's more about, "Okay, I made this thing. It definitely expressed something in me or whatever, but is it actually…Can I imagine it being useful to other people? Can I imagine it being beautiful to someone else?" The danger in saying something like this is that it's kind of like confidence kryptonite. If you question everything in those terms, you're just never going to put anything out. So it's a very tough balance between being self-critical and being overly self-critical, such that you'll never do anything. But I've learned in the past couple of years to be able to say, "You just know it when you see it with some things."

I think a lot of artists do what they do as role fulfillment, meaning, "I am an artist, and an artist does X, Y, and Z." So they go on tour and they buy a van, and they try to get on a label, and they check these boxes, because they have this recipe of what an artist is. And they occupy the social role of *person who is an artist*. But they don't actually focus on the art part, they just focus on the role-fulfillment part. I think as long as you're focusing on the art part, you'll be alright.

If you'd do it anyway, even if you weren't trying to be an artist, even if you weren't playing the game—if you would do the work anyway, then I think it's a good indicator for knowing that it's good. If you're in any way ambiguous about the work that you're creating—it's okay to be wrong, but it's not okay to be ambiguous and be like, "Ah, I guess this is okay." Then do it again, until you're sure.

I struggle with self-doubt. Everybody does. Everything I've ever put out I hate.

Really? That surprises me.

Yes. I can't stand any of my work, but at the time of making it, I was in love with it. And sometimes when I go back and listen to it, I can hear what I heard in those moments. And I think the way I got there was like, "No, this isn't good enough. This doesn't express what I want it to express." I would obsess on little details probably nobody hears. But in the process of obsessing over those little details that nobody hears, maybe I'll make a change that changes the whole thing. Just as a crude example, like, "Oh, the hi-hat doesn't sound right," [then I'll] play with the hi-hat for 10 hours like a crazy person. But at the end of that 10 hours I'm like,

"Maybe it just doesn't need drums," hit mute on the drum tracks on the entire bus, and it snaps together. It's not about the hi-hat, it's about what happens at the end of those 10 hours and you're like, "Ah, I just need to do it upside-down, play it backwards."

You've always seemed to have and exert more energy than most people that I encounter in music.

The latent question there is how or why, I guess. Right? The source of it, I don't know. The how of it, how do I do it and not fall over, I also don't know.

Were you like that before you made music?

Yeah. For example, when I went to university, I changed majors like three or four times, because I was really curious about too many different things. And what I wound up selecting was the hardest thing I could possibly major in. I am deeply interested in physics, but I don't care about the math that much. I don't derive any satisfaction from getting a right answer or finding a new constant or something. I'm aesthetically interested in physics, honestly stated. But I picked it, as opposed to graphic design or something, because it was hard, and I wanted to do the hardest thing possible with my time, because it seemed like it was worthwhile. And maybe there's something about that attitude that I bring to art, maybe there's something about the limitations that I apply to my recording process, for example, which is arbitrary and changing all the time, but it's always something weird.

I think I have always made things harder for myself, and it's not always good, psychologically, but for my art, I think it's very good. I think that's how I arrive at really strange things that other people might not, just because I like beating my head against the wall about it. It looks new after a while.

Are you choosing constraints because you know that it'll make the work better, even if it's a strain psychologically? Are you naturally drawn to making it difficult? And then, the process is guiding itself, based on what you're drawn to?

I don't know. I think I'm definitely attracted to it, and I think I'm definitely aware of the fact that it's helpful. But in the moment, I don't think about either of those things. In the moment, it's just like, "I'm alone in a basement, let's record some vocals."

It's sort of like the aesthetic version of *say yes to everything*. You know what I mean? Like, "Okay, what is the easiest way that I could accomplish this difficult goal? Here's a phone. It's the only microphone I got. Let's record some vocals in it." Take the situation you're presented with and find a way of accomplishing…like MacGyvering.

Right. "The best tool is the one you have."

Yeah. Who said that? Because that sounds great.

I know people—and it's a big tragedy—very talented people will not let themselves do work, because they don't have all of the toys that they think doing serious work requires. And serious work requires nothing more than…I don't even think it requires a pen and paper, honestly. I think serious work requires time and effortful thought in whatever you have to engrave that thought into whatever medium you want to engrave it into.

I want to hear about the Ukraine shows and the thought process behind doing that, because I know there was one. [Note: Emperor X played some concerts in Ukraine in October 2023.]

You'd be surprised how little there was. So from the beginning of the war, [my wife] Lena and I both really wanted to find a way to help, so we had some refugees staying with us in the basement and in our spare bedroom. And we just got really emotionally involved in the war, and it's always been important to me. And really, I've been writing songs about Ukraine since the war started, almost. Most of them are terrible, but I got better at it.

I'm used to writing about future current events. You know what I mean? Most of my stuff is in a slightly exaggerated version of the future. And since 2018, 2019 or so, I haven't needed to. My version of the future is less extreme than the present, and the Ukraine war and having refugees literally staying in our house, I would've written about that. In 2014, that's what my lyrics were about. Not that particular scenario, but… So it's been very difficult for me to shift into a mode of like, "How do I write about the present, when it's every bit as dramatic as anything I'd imagine?"

So I've always cared about it. Anyway, I just randomly got an email from this person in Ukraine and he said, "Hey, not many bands are coming over here. A couple of people and me, and we took notice of some of the things that you've been posting and this Christmas album that you're working on, this Ukrainian Christmas album. We were like, 'What? That's weird. Why is this American living in Germany putting out a Ukrainian-language Christmas album?' I guess if any Western artist will tour, he might." So they wrote to me and there was no thought, I was like, "Of course I'm going to Ukraine to play concerts."

I think people, number one, exaggerate the danger and, number two, even if they didn't, they live with it every day. They've put on 200 shows since the war started. Punk scenes persist, arts and culture persist, and I don't want them to have to do it alone. Why would I say no, because I'm a little bit afraid that something might blow up?

Anyway, there's no aesthetic process, really, other than I've been struggling to write about it, and that I care a lot about it. And yeah, those people move me. They deserve the world, and I hope they get it, and I think they will.

I'm curious about your writing process in terms of how much comes out fully formed, how much of it is figuring out what you're writing about as you go, and how much of that is revealed to you in the editing, or if you usually have a clear idea going in.

Oh no, never a clear idea, ever. I might think I have an idea about what I'm writing about, and then the end product will be something completely different. And I think it's very important to allow for that flexibility. I wouldn't have finished any songs if I had the requirement.

Quite often a song will start…I'll just be walking around the city and I'll be like, "Oh, this would sound cool," and then I literally would pick up my phone like this [brings phone microphone to mouth] and mumble into it. Just, like, crazy glossolalia. I sound like a mad person. And I have a couple dozen of those every couple of weeks, and then I go through them and [find] the ones that have legs, and I don't exactly know what I mean when I say that, but I think other musicians might.

And so you're [probably] familiar with the spiritual practice of glossolalia…disconnecting the semantic part of your brain from the phonetic part of your brain, and just letting your mouth say gibberish. But in a way that sounds like speech.

I'll just make up one right now; [makes a string of random phonetic sounds, landing on juh and repeating it]. I don't know. Jakarta. I'll free-associate the phoneme with the first thing that comes to mind, which for me is usually something at least [potentially] interesting to other people. So there'll be a lot of cross-disciplinary referencing.

[More random mouth sounds] I just came up with "Jakarta butane." Great. That's completely free associative. So then I have a song that I might think is beautiful that contains the words Jakarta and butane. How do I link that? Then, science-fiction brain comes in and says, like, "Okay, cool. What's going on in Jakarta that somebody uses butane? Okay, kid on the street, lighter's out of butane, he wants to light a joint." So these…I stumble towards the meaning rather than starting from a meaning. Is that coherent or do I sound like I'm spewing madness?

It sounds coherent in the sense that it's a coherent idea, but sometimes artists are kind of spewing madness.

I actually think that's exactly what I'm doing. I'm spewing madness until it's not mad, until I'm able to find a way to make it snap into place. And I even think the finished products, particularly with my stuff—probably with everybody's stuff, to some degree—has a bit of that madness in it too.

Are you generally doing that all in one sitting, trying to get as much of it at once as possible, and then from there it's just kind of fine-tuning?

No, it takes years. There are some songs that I've literally worked on for a decade and resurrection-rewrite and come up with new things. I'll do this from album to album. I just came up with something the other day where I just literally plagiarized myself and it was like, "Oh, yeah, I need to do something else with that song."

It can also happen quickly. I also write completely improvisatory and sometimes that comes out great. I don't ban that at all. I can't come up with examples right now, but usually what it looks like is I'll draw a sketch of a thing and I know what the chorus sounds like, and then I'll wrestle with it for five or six weeks with the other words, trying to get it into the science-fictional phase, in the phase where I make it make some kind of narrative sense, but not too much. If you make it make too much sense, then you remove…You rob the listener of that free-associative joy. So you can't tell too much. You have to hide a little bit.

What about when it's a larger conceptual work in scope—like _Suggested Improvements to Transportation Infrastructure in the Northeast Corridor_? You clearly wanted that to be somewhat unified in thematic content.

Yeah. Well, I wrote that in…like six days or something, and basically I just said, "I have to finish a song a day." And that's what I did more or less. Words and everything. From nothing to words.

You quoted somebody and neither one of us knew who it was: "The best tool is the tool that you have." I think it's a similar idea of, "Look, I'm going to go on a tour in three weeks. I need something to promote it with. I'm kind of inspired about the state of transportation right now, and my poetry brain is kicking off about it. Let's see what happens."

Now, I didn't write the words about transportation. The method stayed the same. I still glossolalia, and I still just sort of mumbled a little bit. But every now and then, something came up that would sort of fit the theme. So at the narrative assignment stage, after I'd selected the phonemes and turned them into words, but before I decided what the song was about, I intervened and I said, "Okay, at this phase I'm going to now…" Before we were talking about the kid in Jakarta, which went from _juh_ to _Jakarta_, _butane_ to _there's a kid in Jakarta looking for butane to fill up his lighter because he wants to light up a joint_. It's the third phase that I then intervened, and so how can I interpret this word that I've come to in a way that aligns with the theme of complaining about transportation infrastructure in the Northeastern United States? And so it really wasn't that different until the third stage, and it didn't feel different at all. I think the danger there is in authenticity, the danger is trying too hard…It's not looking like a try-hard, which I have been accused of and which is true. And if anyone thinks that's bad, don't listen to my music [_laughs_]. I am a try-hard, because I do try hard.

I agree! On the one hand, your recording process and songwriting process are pretty solitary, but your performance style is all-hands-on-deck, very loose and spontaneous, open to collaboration. You seem geared towards looking for that spark. I'm curious if you see the song as a completed, finished thing, or if you see it as a mutable form.

Much more B than A. I think the album, the track – let's define some terms here. _The track_ is an audio manifestation of a song. A _performance_ is a live manifestation of a song. I think they're completely different art forms. It's weird because [they are] kind of opposite, but there is a commonality in how I approach them both… in the same way that I respond to my mental internal cues when I'm recording, I respond to external cues in the audience when performing.

I was playing in Philadelphia last year and this really great guy had set up a house show for me, and there was an air conditioning unit right next to me, and my voice wasn't working quite well for a couple of days. And [my voice] would sound good for the first song or two, and then it would just completely go out. But I was singing

quietly and it was working fine, and then this insane loud air conditioning came on. So I decided to play a version of "Compressor Repair" in which I screamed it like a metal song.

It was funny, but in a way that I think could have ruined the show if… I didn't take it seriously, but I meant it. I know it seemed ridiculous, but I think that's an example of me responding to the situational cue in the same way that I respond to a mental cue and sort of free-associatively rolling with it. "How can I flip this horrible situation that I'm in where my voice sounds terrible and there's a loud unit next to me? Oh, I can pick a song about air conditioners and I can scream it."

Chad Matheny Recommends:

The Deutschlandticket: For about $50/month, you can ride every form of public transportation in Germany fare-free, including medium-distance regional trains. It turns the entire country into a transit free-for-all.

Libraries. I am typing this from the Pilsen branch of the Chicago Public Library. The space is quiet and free of insidious pop music, the other people here are focused and serious, the environment encourages quiet focus, and like all libraries it is free and open to the public.

Getting a graduate degree from a public university in Europe: It's often cheap or even free, and many programs are taught in English.

Applying for artist grants from the state: There are more of them than you'd think, they often come with few or no strings attached, and they often have game-changingly-large payouts. Give it a shot.

Voting: Why? Because all of the four things I mention above are dependent on public sphere, which erodes without participation and advocacy from cultural communities. Many people who I otherwise admire and whose views I otherwise share don't vote, because no party or candidate represents their views precisely. In so choosing they cede power to other interests. They are defeating themselves and encouraging sub-optimal outcomes for their (and many other) communities.

Name
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Vocation
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