

On building a system that works for your creative life (and your kids)

Musician David Bazan discusses the importance of routine, how craving human connection influenced his process, and the beauty of playing house shows.

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As told to Jessica Hopper, 2348 words.

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What are you doing today?

I am in Lake Havasu City, Arizona, writing music for the next Pedro the Lion record, which is called *Havasu*.

Why are you there?

Phoenix is the first of five records named after the towns that I lived in through junior high and high school—the last one will be the home album. I did this for the *Phoenix* record, being there. I went down there and spent a few days just driving around and getting ideas, and it really did something for me. I've never done that before. It's pretty extravagant for an indie rocker.

What do you mean by extravagant?

Rather than just in your bedroom or in your rehearsal space. Even having dedicated time where you have weekdays, all day, to write, somehow feels extravagant, but I'm enjoying it and it's really good.

They say being a working father is "having it all." Is that true? Is "having it all" difficult? How do you balance everything?

No one gets to have it all. There are trade-offs. When you leave home for work a lot, you're not a part of things in the same way, the way that everybody really would want. You're being excluded from friendships, and family and things just because you're not there. We've slowly been figuring it out, how to bridge that gap. It takes a lot of work. Part of the difficulty is that when the people that stay at home—my wife Ann, she runs the place—when I get back it's hard for her to make a place for me, and it's hard for me to find my place in the rhythm of everything. Then when you kind of go back and forth and back and forth—small things can just become bigger.

I've found that it helps to have a downstairs music room. I've turned it into a music room/guest room, and when I get home I land there. It's really helped me to have a sense of home to come back to. It's been very tricky. But we've started to figure out some unconventional ways of getting everybody what they need, and everybody's been a lot happier.

I come back home from tour and depending on how long I've been gone, I'm suddenly the parent that my children

want to defer to, or trying to have authority in a space where I haven't been part of the day-to-day in 23 days.

I'll be like, "Hey, I feel like it's not right for you to be doing that," but I don't know if they got their rules changed in a way that I was not hip to. Maybe I just missed the change because I wasn't there, and you can't communicate every little thing.

How do you incorporate what you do professionally into your day when you are at home and have responsibilities to your family?

The schedule for the kids changes every semester a little bit, but what we've figured out now is a balance where before 3:00 p.m. I have the freedom to make my time how I need it for Pedro the Lion work, and then at 3:00 p.m. I'm on call to just do whatever needs to be done that day. If I need to run and pick somebody up, or take somebody to swim, or get dinner started, or whatever, then that's the idea.

I'm terrible at boundaries and I'm very distracted, and so if I don't have that, then it's impossible for me to get work done because I'm just bouncing around and 3-4:00 rolls around and I look down and it's just like, "Man, I haven't done anything in regards to my job, I've only put out fires." If I know every day that I can count on these routines, then it helps me. Ann is very routine-oriented too, so we figured out those parameters.

It sounds like having that schedule is really fundamental to your creativity.

Yeah. I need structure, and it's pretty scarce in this job. We've tried to figure out this ideal rock-band schedule that also takes into account my financial needs, meaning put out a record every year, and do the same months on tour and off. The touring months for us every year are February, May, August, and November, and basically the folks in the band and the crew know that that's when they need to be available. Then that enables me to basically make a production schedule every year, where I know a record is due basically every August 1st, which is us going into the third leg of a year of touring, in which we're basically refining a show, and so that third leg is really fun because we're so good at it by then.

I have a deadline of April 1 to have all of the demos for the record finished, and then in April the band will record our demo of the record, and then we'll take a look at that and rehearse it some more. Then in June we'll record the record, and then in July we'll mix and sort of refine it. So every year, that's the schedule.

At what point did you realize you needed to treat this like a job and not a hobby? Can you talk about having that realization?

For me the only structure that the music industry or this job has ever offered was just the album cycle. That didn't offer nearly enough stability. Now, with the band, the thing that we're doing just requires planning to get it right, and I want some stability of schedule. Part of it comes from wanting to satisfy a lot of different criteria. The main one is that I want to be in a band, and I want it to be a peak experience for me and the people that I'm playing and touring with. I want us to make the best music that we can, and to have the most fun that we can with it, because that's what I respond to in bands that I love. I had to figure out a way to create the structure that would make it so that we could earn this feeling over and over again—of making a record that we love, and making a show that we love, and playing the show better and better, and having that high that you can't buy.

I just want to create a situation where we're doing *that* over and over again, and getting really good at doing that, and just having fun at being good at something. Then, when all of that is functioning how it should, I hope people will love what we're doing. But you can't control that at all.

[This schedule] is a way to do that, and to also give me some stability and structure that calms my head down a little bit, and makes it easier to be a reliable parent because [my kids] get a sense of the rhythm, too. Also, with Pedro The Lion, I get to tour a little less overall, and so it's like a month on, two months off, a month on, two months off, instead of half the year [when I am solo], six weeks on, six weeks off—all year.

Let's talk about that. It seemed like you and Bob [Bazan's manager at Undertow] worked to pioneer house show tours as a sustainable cornerstone of your career in the last couple of years. Can you talk about the impetus there, and how that's shaped your last couple years?

Well, part of it was that the normal way wasn't working.

When you say it wasn't working, what do you mean?

I couldn't put records out fast enough to stay touring in clubs. There just wasn't enough demand for me to continue to have a band when I stopped using the Pedro the Lion moniker.

I don't think most artists go, "Okay, the conventional system doesn't work for me, I need to invent a new system that exists outside of that." Where did that come from?

I had about a 10-month span where the label had asked me not to tour until the record came out. What they meant was, keep a low profile. Don't go into these towns and use up local press resources for this tour because we want to save them up for when the record comes out. And, we don't want you spending your token with your fans right now. We want to wait until the record comes out so it's just like the biggest bang possible. And we agreed. But then I was without income for 10 months. We figured out that house shows were a way to go out and make a living playing for people, but off the radar. It's pretty much direct communication to fans. We have an email list where people can find out about the house shows, and those are primarily the people who come out. It enabled me to go out and make a living doing that.

I have heard artists and labels complain that house show tours don't sell records because you are essentially preaching to the converted, but in 2018 having some unmediated connections with your fanbase seems pretty valuable.

One thing that I experienced almost every show is people coming up and saying, "I have never heard your music before, but this person here is my oldest friend and they insisted that I come to this show," and that happened enough where, you know, if you're thinking of earning fans at a clip of a dozen or more at a time—that [individual interaction] doesn't really register. I just know that if you earn a fan in that situation, that is a devoted fan.

I would still be doing [house shows] if I didn't have the itch to be in a band so bad. The beautiful thing about house shows is that if you can draw 20 people in a town and show up and earn five, or 10, or 20 more fans to come the next time—if you're solo, that's a doable way to go around. You can, in some cases, make a grown-up living that way.

You have continually managed to contort the dream to work for you, and you're doing it in ways that really keep your fans in mind, and not in a way that is corny. What's behind that? What's behind that sentiment?

The slightly harder way seemed like it was a better way. I'm realizing more and more that growing up with a scarcity of connections has driven so much of who I am. I mean, it kind of defines me.

Do you mean in terms of growing up in a super-Christian, cloistered community?

Even more happenstance—depressed mom, workaholic dad, introverted sister. I didn't have what I needed connection-wise at home. When you're coming from a sense of scarcity, there's just a slight hint of desperation to everything, and that colors relationships and opportunities. Then [my family] started moving around for years and years, and that was even more destabilizing. Pedro music has always been grief music, you know?

Mm-hmm.

People would always be like, "Why is it so *that way*?" And I would just shrug a bit, like, "I don't know. Here's a

happy one. How's this sound?" And it's like, "Well, that's also a bummer." I just wrote what seemed like it should be, and I think that that comes from grieving a loss of connection in a way. I couldn't access my feelings directly, and so they come out in this music.

The relationship with fans is an extension of the relationship that I have with, say, an interviewer, which is: I get a sense of connection from being asked personal questions, and questions about my work, that I don't get anywhere else in my life. I've been craving these kinds of connections ever since I was a tiny kid. So I'm very open, and very communicative, and maybe infamously so because I just let it all hang out usually, and I recognize that is because of a need for connection. The fan relationship prioritizes connection, and hopefully not in a needy way, but prioritizes connection because that's what I'm looking for in everything.

This drive for connection has made the house shows much more meaningful. I've also had some really transcendent experiences in non-traditional show environments. So you can just imagine if somebody really genuinely likes the music that I make, to see that in a small environment, that energy feels good to have it radiated back.

That also keeps the circuit between you and your audience tighter, and allows for less possibility of signal disruption, so to speak. It's less a transactional experience and more something you can trust.

Well, and so much of that, you're trying to cobble together a picture of how *does* this work, and how *should* this work. You're sort of seeing what you're a part of, and you pick up the things that are inspiring. It expands what's possible.

With playing music in a room full of people, there's the opportunity for some of the craziest transfers of energy that are possible between humans in those situations. You're just trying to create an environment that allows that to happen-transmitting energy that's worth absorbing.

David Bazan Recommends

1. hearing your feelings and taking them seriously
2. having imaginary friends
3. writing out a plan for important tasks/projects
4. going outside and moving your body
5. keeping and tending to a collection of the things you find most inspiring and grounding in the world (or on the internet) and visiting with them as often as possible, maybe everyday. (ie:songs, quotes, books, poems, articles, twitter threads, podcast episodes, movies, tv show episodes...AKA taking yourself to church on a regular basis. my friend David Dark inspired this with his "attention collection")

Name

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Vocation

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