On the problem with being comfortable

Musician Greg Mendez discusses why it's good to push yourself, separating home and work, and accepting that output ebbs and flows.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2256 words.

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Where are some places that you get inspiration?

I'll be walking or driving, or sometimes I'll even be in a conversation with other people, and all of a sudden I'll be like, "Oh wait," and I won't be, like, rude about it, but one part of my mind will be trying to keep that in there and the other part will be engaging in what's going on. That happens a lot.

I definitely watch a lot of movies and I've been reading more recently. I went through a period of time where I couldn't finish a book for years and that was kind of depressing, but I think I've read like three or four books this year already, so that's cool.

It is less overwhelming than it used to feel to read a book. Sometimes I'll just do it a little bit at a time. I just finished a 500 page book that I thought I couldn't.

When you're writing a song, where doos it start? Do you have a melody first or lyrics first?

Almost 100 percent of the time I start with a melody or chords, where there's a melody that I hear in it. I don't know if I've ever written a song lyric first. Usually I'm in phases with it, where I'll have a bunch of ideas for melodies and/or chord progressions and I'll just come up with a bunch of those and then I'll go through a lyric writing phase where I'm more just writing words to these things.

But I always need to do the words more like a puzzle. I feel like I'm not very good at writing free-form. When I have a melody, it's like the syllables are already there and I fit the words to it like puzzle pieces, like, "Oh, this vowel sounds good there," and that'll kind of influence what the words are. Or if I'm like, "Yeah, I like this lyric, but I don't actually like how it sounds when it's sung with that melody," then that can't be the lyric.

Do you run into creative blocks. Or once you get going, do you have momentum?

It comes in fits and starts. In the past I thought about them as creative blocks, but I don't really think about it like that anymore. I just think about it as a season. That's okay.

When you have those moments, do you ever bounce things off other people or do you just try to push through?

Sometimes I just do something else. I'm going through one of those right now, but I'm still playing music for

fun. I'll go to the studio space and play guitar or keyboard and come up with some stuff. I'll record a little voice memo of a melody. I can't write a single word right now, which is okay. I just feel like there's nothing in there. It can be frustrating, because I like the feeling of making something, but it's not fair of me to be down on myself just because I can't do something I like, in the moment I want to do it.

What do you think it was about the last record that connected with so many people?

I honestly wish I could say. I feel like it could have been any number of things really. The way the songs were done was the most front and center of anything I'd done. With previous records, I feel like I was cloaking things in a way, that I was less sure of the songs so the sound had to be blanketing it a little bit, or the lyrics had to be a little bit more like obscure so I wasn't embarrassed or whatever. And I think on the last record, it was just naked, and maybe that has something to do with it.

With the new record on a bigger label, did you change your process at all or did you approach it the same?

There were definitely some suggestions like, do you want to work with this or that producer. And it would have been encouraged if I was like, "Oh, I'm going to go into a nice studio or work with a producer." I intentionally decided not to do that for a couple of reasons. One of them being, I feel like I have honed this way of doing it for so long without those options and I'm not sure if my home-baked skill set would come through in a more professional setting, where you're paying for time. I wanted to be comfortable doing it and I tried to be in the same mindset of following what I liked and what felt true to me, and what was hitting me emotionally. But I do think on a psychological level it was different just because of the different circumstances.

I find working with limitations to be useful. I just feel sharper that way. A lot of creative people run into the problem of working from home and not knowing when to stop. You mentioned recently that you moved your music studio out of your house. When did you decide to do that, and what compelled you to separate church and state?

My friends have a studio in this space, and my friend Evan always helps me engineer the drums at his studio. A room opened up there, and it was room number nine, which is kind of my lucky number. It was always my number in sports when I was a kid. This room was pretty affordable, and my wife, V, had been kind of pushing me to move the studio out of the house for basically the entire duration of recording this last record. You know, we have a two-bedroom apartment but it's pretty small and I would have to only really use it when she wasn't at home, because anything that was going on in the apartment would come through in the mics. It was harder for me to work on stuff but also it made it harder for me to not work on stuff. I could take like five steps and be sucked back into this thing.

I've been going to the new spot every day, and just having a little half-hour commute and a whole different space for my work has been putting me in a better mindset, where home feels like home and that feels like the place to go work.

What do you think are the most essential elements, or most essential resources, for you to have a successful day of making music?

It's mostly my mindset. Like if I'm feeling bad or anxious or depressed or hungry or tired. If anything else is kind of clogging up my brain, it's not going to go as well. And it's not that I don't do it if I'm feeling any of those things, but generally the times when I feel like everything is going really well, I come in to the studio and I'm ready for it to go well and I'm excited about it.

I don't think I've figured out how to really create those ideal conditions besides that it helps if I'm well-rested, if I've eaten good, that kind of stuff. But that doesn't mean that it's going to be good. It's just kind of luck of the draw, I guess.

What does it mean to be successful as a musician in 2026—say, a year passes, you look back and you're like, "All right, that was a successful year." What would that involve?

Being able to keep doing what I do without having to do anything I really don't want to do. I think I've done that. I think the record's good. I think I believe in it. I don't think I want to listen to it right now, but I stand by it. The rest of it's kind of none of my business.

Do you have any pressure from any of your team asking you to post more on social media? How do you deal with that aspect of the music industry at this point?

I kind of just don't do it if I don't want to do it, I guess. But yeah, there's definitely more pressure. I had none before, besides my own pressure.

But it just makes me feel bad to be on social media. And I'm addicted to it, as far as like, I'm addicted to my phone. Sometimes I'll find myself like scrolling on it without even realizing I'm doing it.

I don't want to be part of that. I want to be a part of that noise as little as possible. You're making a lot of really horrible people a lot of money by posting on social media, you know, even though there's a sense where it's helping you, too. I had this realization recently that anytime you're on your phone, you're at work for them. It doesn't matter what you're doing, you are generating wealth for these people who are destroying the world getting everybody addicted to it, and we think of it as leisure. Like, 'Oh yeah I'm just scrolling on Instagram.' And they're collecting data and seeing how long you look at something, whether you like something, whether you're engaging with it, and selling that information. So I want to clock into that as little as possible.

I don't knock anybody for being really active on that because it's fucking hard out here to be an artist, but I just want to find a balance where I'm not yelling into this void and trying to convince people to listen to the music I make. I also want to be making as little money for these people as possible. I want to be clocked out of that unpaid job as much as possible.

There's power in doing less.

I think people also like to feel like they're like finding art for themselves. They appreciate it more when they feel like that. There is something to letting people find it themselves, for sure. And it also just makes me feel bad because you're constantly like, "Oh, this post didn't do that well." I just don't want that to be on my mind. It's counterproductive for what I'm actually trying to do to have that be such a big part of my life.

I was listening to the new record today when I was walking my dog and I was thinking it sounds so intimate. When you were being interviewed at your show at Beauty Bar, the interviewer said something about how you have a gentleness in your work. I can see that. It also feels like, "Hey this person's singing to me." It's big music, but on a very intimate scale. Can you imagine working in a different way where, for example, you might tour with a full band?

I did one time. We did this full band record called *& Gum Trash* in 2018, where the songs were from like 2015 that were mostly on this thing called Phone Records. I got my first smartphone and recorded a bunch of songs in the Garage Band app like a psycho and I don't think they were that good. But we did one tour like that in 2018 and I think it felt cool, I liked the people. I thought it was fun, but I also felt like I was kind of trying to be somebody else in a way. Something about the songs got lost in the loudness, almost, and I could imagine [playing with a full band] again in a different way, maybe, where it's more catered to being quieter. But I also just struggled because it was definitely like—it felt like a rock band, and I'm not a rock front man, as much as I always wanted to be.

Do you find that you're in a better mood, or feel better in general, mentally and physically when you are making work? Does doing the work put you in a better a better space?

It can, yeah. It can put me in a worse space, too, depending. I feel like I experience it all in the process. I think that feeling all of it is important, too. If I made something without any sort of struggle, I'm not sure it would be satisfying. I think struggle is good, in a sense. I think that comes through in the music. You can tell.

There’s a lot of truth to that… coasting’s not the way to go.

Yeah. It’s diminishing returns if you don’t push yourself and you keep doing what you’re comfortable doing. Like, yeah, maybe you’ll be happy with the first one and then you make another thing, and it’s like doing drugs or something. Like the first one gets you high, the second one’s like, “Well, that didn’t make me feel as good as the last one.” If I was really comfortable, I probably wouldn’t feel the need to make anything at all. I would just sit on the couch and be content.

Greg Mendez recommends

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

The NOFX autobiography (even if you don’t like the band)

Webb Chapel - *Vernon Manner*

The first two *Hunger Games* movies

Gray Matter - *Food For Thought*

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