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As told to J. Bennett, 2762 words.

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On always keeping yourself open to new ideas

Musician Greg Puciato (*The Dillinger Escape Plan*, *Killer Be Killed*) discusses removing the division between creativity and downtime, protecting your inputs, trusting your instincts and ideas, and why he's more interested in a person's brain than their genre.

How would you describe your artistic philosophy?

It's really difficult to talk about this without sounding pretentious. But I don't really know what I'm doing—that's the thing. I'm not someone that went to school for art or music. I don't really have any ability to have technical conversations with people, and I'm not a fan of this or that kind of approach, like divergent thinking versus convergent thinking—or any of the things that people talk about to try to define creativity. I don't care about any of it. I don't have any interest in categorizing anything; I have no interest in learning about why I do anything or getting more deliberate about my process.

The only thing that I've tried to really do is protect my input to make sure that I'm not inputting terrible stuff. I try to block it out. When someone says to me, "Hey man, have you heard how bad this song is? You've got to listen to this—it's so terrible," I will be like, "Don't play it for me. I don't want to hear it. If it's terrible, I don't want to hear it. Don't play it for me as a joke. I don't want to fucking hear whatever some hilariously bad thing is that you think it's funny." Because it's going to get stuck in your head and then it's going to live in there and fester and at some point in time, it's going to influence you.

The other thing I do is leave my ability to output to be completely free and be completely open to it at all times—instead of it being a designated time of day. My brain crossed over from being, "My job is to be the singer of the Dillinger Escape Plan" to, "My job is to be an artist, and to be creative and to capture that creativity." And I meet a lot of other people that are like this—you have to be open to the creative spark at all times. It's kind of like never turning your antenna off, whether you're in the supermarket or taking a shit or you're in the shower, eating breakfast, whatever. I mean, even if you're in a movie theater or if you're on a date or if you're at an important dinner...I mean, these things can happen at any time.

So it's about recognizing the moment and capturing it, regardless of external circumstances.

It's like when you try to remember something right before you go to sleep and you tell yourself that you're not going to write it down or you're not going to record it because you'll remember it the next day, but you never do, and it's gone. And then you can only remember something that feels kind of similar, but you know it's not exactly the same and it sucks compared to the thing that you actually had, and you let it go and now you're mad at yourself.

So I try to just always be receptive to those starting points because those starting points are the essence. That's the core. That's the honesty kernel that you're trying to find. It's like a river, and the river's going past and you're sifting through it at all times and every now and then something hits the net and you catch something. You've got to grab that thing and shoot it aside and then you can figure out what it is later. But that immediate kernel is the foundation of pretty much anything worthwhile.

It'll be the middle of the day and you're in traffic and all of a sudden you've got some random drum pattern in your head. You need to take out your phone and beatbox that pattern into the voice recorder and come back to it later. If you don't, it's going to go away, and that was a really pure moment. Or if you pick up a guitar, you need to be recording what you're playing right away or else you're going to miss whatever random thing comes out of you that you're never going to remember by the time 10 or 20 minutes go by. So you have to be receptive to everything at all times.

How did you learn to maximize that vigilance?

I've kind of structured my life in a way where I don't have a lot to do. I don't like making plans. I really like doing nothing, and I like having a lot of time to do nothing. I like having a lot of time to allow these kinds of things to happen. If someone was like, "What did you do today?" I already have an answer for them because it was eight or nine hours of nothing, but in the middle of that eight or nine hours of nothing, while I was walking up the stairs, a thought popped into my head that was either a lyric or a riff or a drum pattern or something that then became something that people hear later on and they're like, "This is a fully fleshed song." But to me, I don't hear the fully fleshed song. I hear the fucking little loop that popped into my head while I was walking up the stairs during the day when I was doing nothing.

I know that there're plenty of people who have a specific process, like, "Okay, at 9AM everyday I'm going to sit down at my computer and my keyboard and I'm going to start trying to make something." And whatever you make at the end of the day, that's what you did. But I don't want it to feel like an obligation. I don't want creativity to feel like a job in a negative way. So I feel like I just try to trust that the ideas are going to keep coming and stay open to them and try to stay loose.

You also can't have too many rules. You cannot tell yourself what you can and can't do. If you don't tell yourself that you're only able to write this kind of music or this kind of song, you can really do whatever you want. And that's been really important to me, too—to not just throw something away because it doesn't sound like the thing that I think people want from me. Because then you're following your audience—they're not following you.

I imagine you developed this philosophy over time. You didn't have it in place when you joined The Dillinger Escape Plan at age 21, right?

Early on, I subscribed to the idea that I really needed to beat my head against the wall and try to write 50 different vocal patterns to every song and then try to find the best one. I had this idea that you need to work really, really, really hard and spend a lot of time on everything. And if you don't, the next best thing that you might write is going to be right around the corner and you're going to leave that stone unturned. And you're never going to know if you don't just beat your head against the wall for endless amounts of time.

At some point, I started to realize that no matter how many variations I had of something, my first or second ideas were always the best ones. Then you start to feel guilty because you're like, "Well, I'm not working that hard." You are working, but it's more of an abstraction. It's more of a weird gift where you have some ability to bring together unrelated ideas or you hear things between the lines.

Hearing between the lines is the glue of musical creativity. When did you realize you had a knack for it?

I thought everyone heard vocal patterns when they listened to instrumental music. I grew up thinking that everyone just heard music that wasn't there. When I was a kid, I would listen to music that I was into and I would think to myself, "Oh, there should be another guitar part over this part to make this song a little bit better," or "He should have played the ride there instead of the hi-hat," or I would sing vocal patterns over the top of music that didn't have vocal patterns, and I just thought that that's what everyone did. And I thought that's what everyone could hear, so it didn't seem like a talent to me. It wasn't like I sat around practicing an instrument for 1000 years and got good enough to be in an orchestra, so I just felt guilty.

It takes a while for you to accept that maybe it's some sort of gift that you should nurture and you should take care of. And I think, I guess somewhere around [The Dillinger Escape Plan's 2013 album] *One Of Us Is The Killer*, I started to accept that it wasn't in my best interest to beat myself to death to get ideas out of me. And that it was wasting my own time because the ideas weren't any better than when I wasn't doing that.

I wasn't getting anything out of the six hours that I spent sitting in front of the laptop, trying to find new vocal patterns. The vocal pattern that I came up with in the shower was the one I ended up using, you know? It makes you feel guilty or lazy, but then it was like, "I guess the only thing I can do is just give myself more space and allow myself to go into this more hippy-dippy way of approaching my work." That becomes harder to define, but it is very much about keeping yourself in an open state.

How have you done that?

It means not compartmentalizing your brain to, "Now I'm at the store," or "Now I'm writing," or "Now I'm hanging out." I never stop. It's a problem, too, because I have a hard time being present. I'm so spacey and I'm so internal that I have a hard time being present in activities because I'll stop hearing what the person I'm talking to is saying. And I'll start hearing a vocal pattern or something over this part that I've been waiting to get the vocal pattern for. And then I have to say, "Hey, hang on a second. I need to walk outside." Then I'm standing outside repeating a vocal pattern into the phone and the person I'm hanging out with is like, "What the fuck, man? You're not even here. You just missed the best part of the movie"—or whatever it is that's going on—but so be it.

Has the difficulty of being present and your preference for not making plans affected your life on a deeper level?

I just feel like I'm on the path to becoming an all-eccentric person that doesn't put anything else at the same level of importance that I put this. I don't have a wife; I don't have kids; I don't really even think about that kind of stuff. I don't think of them as part of the plan. To me, being successful is having a lifestyle that makes you happy—and this makes me happy. I feel like this is how I really have always been. When I look back at being 13 or 15 and I was really internal and I just didn't like to make plans...some people might call it unreliable, but it's not unreliable if I'm reliably reluctant to fucking making plans.

So I kind of just like to do what I want, when I want, and I keep my schedule really free and I keep myself able to not be obligated to do a lot of other things. And that makes me happy. Nothing makes me more excited than getting one of those ideas in your head when you're driving home from somewhere. I don't even really listen to music while I'm driving in the car—I just fucking drive in silence. And then at some point I come up with something and then I get excited about that thing and then I get home and try to see if it actually sounds good when you play it on guitar or if it actually sounds good when you try the vocal part over the thing you've been working on. When it does, then you've got the block in front of you that you've got to shape into the thing you're looking for.

Last time we spoke, you mentioned that you don't really consider yourself a guitar player or a bass player or even a singer, really. You're an artist and you use whatever tools are at your disposal to create the thing you want to make.

Yeah. I really think the brain is the most important part. To me, the more valuable art tells me something

about the person that made it. I'm not interested in contributing to a genre. I don't care about how to move a genre forward. I don't care, mostly, about art that fits into a bracket. But I really find individuals fascinating. Someone like David Lynch—I don't really consider him to be a filmmaker. It's his brain that's valuable, his view of the things he's looking at.

If you paint a photorealistic picture of a tree because you got really, really good at painting photorealistic pictures, that's not that exciting, I could have just taken a picture of that tree; it looks exactly the fucking same. But if you change a picture of a tree and it looks wildly unlike a tree, and there's something really insane about it, like it's on fire and it's blue or something, then it's like, "Whoa, this is what's going on inside of this person's brain." That's fucking amazing. That's way more interesting to me, even if it's done with the skill level of a first-grader in terms of painting. It's way more interesting to me than the guy who got good enough to paint a photorealistic painting. And that has nothing to do with painting. It has to do with the person's brain.

That same person would make you something crazy if you gave them a xylophone. They'd make something that sounds way more interesting to me than a guy who studied the history of xylophone playing.

If you look at the artwork that children make and the kind of stories that kids come up with, it's all fucking fascinating because they haven't started learning yet what they should and shouldn't do and what the rules are and what they're expected to do. Their brains are still so abstract, and they never give you the thing that they think is expected of them. They give you the actual filter they're seeing things through. And at some point in time, a lot of people get way from that. And then it becomes a bunch of people standing around applauding craft. Who cares?

That's why indie films and people that have limitation, I think, can be a lot more interesting than people who are super technically skilled. A lot of times, the technical wizards bore you to death. It's the people that are pushing against their limitations that you really feel something from. Tony Iommi can't play like Joe Satriani, but I know which one I'd rather listen to.

That's a great example. Tony Iommi lost a couple fingertips on his fret hand, so he can't even feel the strings. But he wrote "Paranoid" and "Iron Man" and a few dozen other classics.

Exactly. And I would be interested in what Tony Iommi would do if he had to paint a picture, but I would not be interested at all in what Joe Satriani would do if he painted a picture. Not to call people out by name—I've got nothing against Joe Satriani—but I feel like the person's brain is what interests me. But you can marry the two—you can be good at your craft and maintain your individualism as a thinker and as an artist. That's the ideal—to somehow grow your skillset and your knowledge base without losing your ability to find those inception points.

Recommended Greg Puciato:

Greg Puciato - *Child Soldier: Creator Of God*

The Dillinger Escape Plan - *Ire Works*

The Black Queen - *Infinite Games*

The Dillinger Escape Plan - *Miss Machine*

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