On recognizing your calling, the pleasure of being in a band, and the ways music supports us during terrible times

Musician Jarvis Cocker on the challenges of trying to create live experiences during lockdown, rediscovering the joys of playing in a band again, making peace with your past body of work, and always looking for ways to make collaboration and creativity feel new

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2862 words.

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I know that you are currently quarantined in the North of England, near Sheffield. Had the global pandemic not happened, you'd be releasing a new album today, literally, and prepping for a big tour. What are you doing instead?

Well, lots of people are trying to figure out ways to play online or do some kind of virtual thing at least so they can play and we just tried that today. It wasn't terribly successful. I guess like lots of people, first you have a Zoom call and you think, "Hey, we're all on the same call, let's play a song." And then you try and play and realize that all the latency and the time lag just makes it really impossible. So then we started to look into other things. We're still trying to figure it out. Other than that, the main creative thing that we've done in the last couple of months is that we've been playing a bit of a musical consequences game. So members of the band take turns coming up with a musical idea and then they pass that musical idea onto another member of the band who then adds something to it and passes it along to the next person. It's a bit like when you do that game as a kid where you've got a piece of paper and someone draws the head and then folds it and then somebody else is supposed to draw the shoulders and then you carry on like that. Exquisite Corpse, I think they call it.

What have the results been like?

Good. I mean, I don't know whether I'd ever inflict it on somebody else. I don't know. We'll see. It's just a way we've been able to still make music together. We had a kind of session for a couple of hours today to try and play live online together, but it's going to be a while before we can properly sort that out. I guess everybody's trying to solve that problem right now. I did a song for a Light in the Attic fundraiser thing they had a couple of weeks ago. Those things work okay, but you can still tell that it's not a live performance. You need some kind of feeling that there's an audience there with you.

The only thing that I've found that comes a little bit towards that is that I've been doing some online discos on Saturday nights, this Domestic Disco thing. And because that's on Instagram—and I'm not advertising on Instagram or anything—but because it's a live video on Instagram, then people can kind of write text notes to you and react to it as it's going on. That's the nearest I've experienced to some kind of live thing where you actually are

aware of an audience and the audience is kind of participating in it as you're actually doing it.

It's been interesting to see how people have adapted the technology to suit their needs right now. We've been watching lots of drag shows on Twitch, which is the live platform that mostly video gamers use.

That's quite good that the drag queens are on the cutting edge. They are always here to show us the way.

Your new record was also conceived and written in a pretty unconventional way.

I put together a band and the basic tracks were recorded during concerts and we were working on the songs as we were playing them. We were recording every show and kind of monitoring how they were developing. Then there was this kind of eureka moment where someone suggested that we could actually use those live recordings as the basis for the record and not just for demo purposes. That was amazing really, because something I've always had issues with is going into a studio and how sometimes that can suck the life out of what you do and you can start to overthink something or just become too self-conscious about what you're doing. This idea that maybe you could have almost accidentally recorded it in an unselfconscious way; I got really excited by that.

I think you can kind of feel that in the songs. It doesn't sound like a live record because live records generally sound pretty bad. But the songs have got some life to them because they were made in front of audiences. It seems especially novel now that we made a record this way, not that nobody can play shows anymore. We kind of made this record in collaboration with an audience and the shape of the songs was really determined a lot by this thing of going out and playing material that people weren't familiar with, so we had to work out ways of getting it over to an audience. The songs changed shape during the process of trying to work out the best way to do that. I'm proud of the fact that we did it that way because, like I said, it's not possible now. At a time where everybody's in a situation where they're missing human contact, it's nice that human contact was really essential to actually finishing those songs off.

It's interesting how many musicians have told me recently how they never imagined they'd miss touring as much as they do right now, even if they were totally burnt out on it before.

I think there's a lot of things like that now. It's like generally society had already moved into this more acclimatized, separated way of being. People would watch Netflix, and they were ordering food in rather than going out to restaurants, or whatever. So in a way, self-isolation was already the order of the day or we were already moving towards that. And it has taken this pandemic to suddenly make people realize what they were in danger of losing by going down that road. It is the same thing with musicians. Musicians are always moaning about how tired they were of touring, me included probably. But take it away and you miss it. Once you're not allowed to show off in front of people on the stage anymore, then you realize that it's actually really good fun.

Even before the world shut down, it's nice to encounter music that was made for reasons other than, "We're going into a studio and make 12 songs and then go play them for a year," or whatever. That's the cycle lots of musicians seem to be trapped in.

What led to it was really that since the last record that I made, *Further Complications*, I did various things. I was doing a radio show in the UK for a long time, but I was always thinking about songs. The deciding factor really was just this invitation that came from Sigur Rós to go and play a festival of theirs at the end of 2017 in Reykjavik. I got the invitation and I was going to turn it down because I didn't have a band. And then something just told me to say yes. Once I said yes, that put me in the situation where I had to find a way of doing the show. Then the blindingly obvious thing was, "Okay, get a band together." Then I felt a bit silly really, because as soon as I got a band together and we started playing, it became obvious that *that* was what was missing—I just needed to have a band. I've been in a band since I was 14 years old. Maybe it's one of those things where you just need to surprise yourself, or just rediscover what it was you liked about doing it in the first place.

Maybe you just got a little bit, not blasé about it, but maybe that's really it. Maybe it all just becomes a bit

automatic and it takes something to kind of reawaken you to it. In this instance, we went back to the way of doing things that all bands do when they first start out, which is you kind of hang around, you write a bunch of songs and when you think you've gotten some songs, then you take that next step of playing them to people. Through that process of playing them to people, you learn about the songs. You think, "Oh, this song is good, this one's not so good. They liked that bit. Let's play that twice." You collaborate with an audience to give the song the shape when you play things live, which is something that you don't get from sitting in front of a computer where you almost always make mathematical decisions. You end up saying, "Let's do this four times and let's do this two times," because that's the way it works on a computer. Everything's on a grid. But when you're in a club and you've got people three feet away from you, the song then has more of an emotional logic to it.

I decided quite early on that I would respect whatever we'd recorded. So if I came across a recording of a song and I thought, "Oh, that's it" then we'd keep it. I decided that, once I'd had that feeling, I wouldn't try to change it. I wouldn't say, "Oh, but there's an extra bar there, we should get rid of that." Or, "That's not quite right." There was a reason for thinking that's right and so you shouldn't mess around with it. That's some of the problem with modern recording technologies, people can go back and tweak things all the time. People put things into Pro Tools and speed it up or take a bit out or all this kind of stuff. I think sometimes you can kind of kill a song by doing that.

You just have to trust your instincts. If something sounds good, I can really forgive a lot of technical issues. Something can sound terrible really, but as long as it somehow connects to me and makes me feel something, that's really what I'm looking for, I'm not really that bothered about whether the snare drum sounds good or not. I like things to sound okay, but I think the emotional core of the song is the important thing and it's usually the most difficult thing to actually find. There's no fader on the mixing deck that says "emotion" or "truth" on it. There's no pedal that you can buy and plug a guitar into that will give you emotional truth or provide emotional connection.

So you really are someone who works better in a group dynamic.

Yes, I do. I've come to realize that. Playing with other people can inspire you to make decisions or do things that, left to your own devices, you probably wouldn't. You'd probably just do the same thing that you always do. I think for me it's better to work in a group.

Like you mentioned, you have played in bands since you were a kid and you've had the experience of playing in a band that is beloved and iconic for a lot of people. It's obviously a better thing to have been in a band that people love than to not have been in a band but people love; but did the weight of that experience—or the shadow of Pulp—ever feel like a shadow over your creative path going forward?

Well, no. Not really. We got back together in 2011 and 2012 and we did quite a lot of shows and for me, that really brought that chapter to a satisfying end. We rehearsed for quite a long time and I think we've managed to play the songs convincingly and authentically, and by that I just mean that we managed to locate what the songs were about. They still rang true.

So that was good for me and I'm proud of those songs. I remember when we started rehearsing for those shows, I was quite happy because I've been in the band Pulp since I was about 14 and for a very long time, it was a band nobody really gave a shit about. I could've felt that I wasted my life on rock and roll or something like that. I don't really listen to music after I finish making it really, so when we went back and listened to the old songs, I was just pleasantly surprised that they still seemed to stand up. I thought, well maybe I didn't waste *all* my youth then. I felt okay and I was pleased about that. I still like those songs, but I suppose part of why I like those songs is because I'm not playing them every night.

I did feel that the last concert tour went as well as it possibly could have. But then I thought, "Well, that's it." You can't just keep doing that. We didn't play any new material. I was pleased about that because it wasn't like, "Here we are, we're back and we're going to play you some old hits, but first you've got to listen to some new songs." We weren't trying to sell anybody anything. We were just trying to play what existed and bring it back to life in a convincing way. I thought it was pretty much a perfect tour, really; and that was a good end to

that. But then I just had to try and think about what I would do after that.

I did a radio show in the UK for seven years and I really enjoyed doing that and I got a lot from it. But all the while I was doing that, in the back of my mind there was still a voice saying to me, "You really should get on with making a record." I would try to ignore that voice and say, "No, I'm a broadcaster now. I'm still involved in music but I'm just playing other people's music. That's valid." But then the voice would come back and say, "Yeah, but you've got to get back to your real job." In the end, what I've come to accept is that actually it's quite a good thing. Some people might say it is a calling. If there is something that you just are compelled to do, that's great really. A lot of people search their whole life trying to find something that they feel compelled to do and never really get there. So the fact that I've got something that I keep coming back to, even if sometimes it drives me crazy, is ultimately a great thing. It can be something that drives you mad because if your song isn't working, you'll lay awake all night trying to think why isn't it working and replaying it over and over in your head. It's like, "Oh my god, just shut up and let me get some sleep." In the end, it's worth it if you manage to create something.

I'm not complaining about the current global pandemic because everybody's in the same situation. But having gone through this 10-year gap between *Further Complications* and this new record, having finally made the record and being really happy with it. It's kind of ironic, because now everybody's on lockdown. I'm finally ready to go out and play and the universe says, "No."

What have been the things that have brought you the most pleasure or the most solace while quarantined?

Music is still the thing that has been doing it for me, really. I've watched a bit of TV and some films, but not that much. Music is the thing for me and that's why I started doing these online disco things. If it's music you can dance to or somehow get involved with, then you can kind of escape the situation. That's always been one of the things I've liked about music—if you really get into something and you listen deeply to it, then it's like your immediate surroundings just melt away and you could be anywhere. You just inhabit that world where the song is created.

I've relied on music in that way in the past when I was living in shit places or I didn't have much money or whatever, music would always be somewhere that I could just escape to for a while. That's probably a big reason for me making music as well. You can achieve that same kind of release.

I've found it true in this quarantine situation as well. Music feels good right now, especially when you get a song that you can dance to, because then you're also getting some exercise. We all need exercise when we've got to stay indoors all the time, otherwise we're going to get really unhealthy and sad. No one wants that.

Selected Jarvis Cocker:

Pulp - *His 'n' Hers* (1994)

Pulp - *Different Class* (1995)

Pulp - *This Is Hardcore* (1998)

Further Complications (2009)

Room 29 (with Chilly Gonzales) (2017)

JARV…IS (2020)

Name
Jarvis Cocker

Vocation
Musician