On taking your time

Musician Jason Pierce (of Spiritualized) on songwriting, what it means to chase after your own creative mistakes, and the responsibility of always doing your best.

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As told to Gary Canino, 1973 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Time management, Focus.

In the press for your new record you've mentioned Kris Kristofferson and other classic singer-songwriters as an influence.

What's amazing about their songs is they avoid the obvious hooks, and there's a narrative that goes through them. So it's like a sing-along, where you don't actually sing along to those songs. When I saw Kristofferson live recently, he had this musical, ghostly sound behind his voice and it was just absolute magic. I was completely humbled by his songwriting. These artists pack these songs up and send them out, and I'll never forget them. I forget that people buy tickets to see our shows until I see them, then I'm astounded that people actually like what we do and we don't have to prove ourselves every time, but we always do anyway, if that makes sense. It always feels like a challenge, like we've gotta raise the bar.

Did you always want to have big arrangements in your music before you had the means to have so many people on stage?

We still don't have the means to do it. We still lose money, but playing stripped down is great, too. As soon as you get rid of the massive band, there's more room for the guitars all of a sudden. But we can do the big-band shows now because we just released a record. So now it's more about pushing the bar outside of what we're able to do. We're still rehearsing the choir 15 minutes before we're on the stage. It's a ton of work, but it's now or never. At the end of the day, sometimes it feels like, "Really? All this effort into playing one show?" It's nine little songs. It seems like sort of the dumbest thing in the world sometimes, but then there's this sort of extraordinary feeling that is like, "That's just what we do."

Some parts for the players are written out, but other times it's looser, and they can just follow the dots. And it's just a glorious thing, and also not a given that it's gonna work. You know what it can be if you can get it to reach those heights. It's also desperately trying not to make these things like a pantomime, like pressing the green button to start the set, and then pressing stop at the end. I see that all the time in festivals. Bands just roll out, and it's as if they don't even need the band, like the show runs itself. It's taped. We're trying to work hard to get that energy back.

This live show is quite an experience. When you play "Oh Happy Day," people react in the crowd as if they're having a spiritual breakthrough.

It's that kind of experience, it just takes over. I got asked to play with Nick Cave at a show in Australia and he said, "Will you join us for the last song?" It's not something that I usually do. I don't feel like I'm confident with songs I don't know. He said, "Look, nothing's gonna go wrong. It's only two chords. What could go wrong?" I said, "Knowing me, I'm gonna play the chords the wrong way, but I'll do it if you want."

Halfway through the song, the guitarist came over to me and said, "You're playing the chords wrong." But I was watching what the audience was looking at, and it was like watching a tennis match, because nobody was watching the band, everybody was just watching Nick play. But I feel like everybody watches our show, they're just watching this amazing whole. It's like the focus is that amazing sound, and it's not like it's just about a character.

Even more so because you play off to the side of the stage. It was speculated that the reason Phil Spector forced people to do so many takes was to tire them out, that way they play with less personality and play more as a group.

I've heard that too, but I don't know what the value of that is; almost channeling a non-personality in a weird way? People always complain about the cost of getting players, but I think one of the cheapest things you can pay for is getting somebody who can play. You can put dots in front of these people and they're gonna play it in a way that shows 28 years of experience. So you've got this amazing ability, and I don't know why you would want to strip that away.

Have you've ever seen the footage of Sinatra recording "It Was a Good Year," recording it live in the studio? He's doing the final vocal take right in the room with the orchestra. Then he finishes and he goes, "How long was that?" It's like the first thing he cares about.

Did he know it was good? He must've known it was good. I'm standing by that we're all making music just by following the errors. When you watch those films about Brian Wilson in the studio, there's always this conceit that musicians are geniuses with this beautiful, finished thing in their head, and that all they have to do is transfer it down. I don't think it works like that.

Musicians are always the first to say that they're geniuses, and if they don't, someone else says it. But when you see Brian Wilson, he's always going, "What did you play there? What did you do? What was that?" You follow the errors and you pursue it, and I think that's where all the most interesting great bits of music come from. There's something magic that happens when you get these musicians in the room together. There's all these kind of nonsensical things that really make the music or recordings good, and you only get that with people if you stick around just trying things out. Sometimes it's harder to recognize your own errors.

I want to explore all the possibilities. I like to know that it doesn't work a particular way as much as I like to know why it worked the way it is. I don't feel there's any problem with that, knowing the reason you've got what you've got is because you've tried it ten or twelve other ways. And I think that's part of the process. The process of making the record is satisfying yourself. I've been accused of being a perfectionist, but it's not the perfection I'm after, it's just seeing what you can do. Otherwise, you're just going into a room, laying down a song and saying, "That's the record." So it's testing your own stamina and finding and seeing what happens.

Spiritualized is really into the concept of creating one whole piece of music in an album format. *Ladies and Gentleman We Are Floating In Space* even says "1 Tablet 70 Min" on the cover.

I've never been particularly into making mix tapes, I've always listened to albums. I'm shocked with the number of people I meet who seem to be listening to this new record from the beginning to end, just as it was conceived. I still think of music in terms of albums. Certain songs work because they're preceded by something else and there's a narrative. It's like a chapter of a book, isn't it? You can read a single chapter, but there's a book around it and I think that's really important. And the album is conceived like that. It seemed like a real stepping into something uncharted to go, "We're just going to play our new album from beginning to end," but that was almost decided before I started recording the album. I felt that music was the only art form where you go out to promote your new work by playing old work. You don't find that in painting or writing or anything else, so I just felt like we're gonna do a show with new material, and now it feels so effortless.

How do you view music as being a healing agent for people?

All music is, isn't it? I'm a big believer that the music you listen to affects your personality, and becomes part of who you are and the language you use. I've realized during interviews with people in South America or Japan that often they had learned their second language through songs, and if not through songs, movies. Music affects the way you relate to people, it affects the way you fall in love. I said that I forget that people buy tickets to see us, but I meet people that got married to our music and met their partners through a particular piece of music. There's this kind of weird soundtrack to their lives that becomes part of who they are. It's a big deal and I think people know it's a big deal, they just don't always recognize it.

Do you feel like it gets harder to create music as you get older?

I think the responsibility just gets bigger. There's a trend of making records where you're pretending you're still 13, and then there's no bearing on where you are or who you are. What if people bought into that notion of you as an artist? It was so important in making this record that this wasn't just a record that was tagged as "this is what we do." Why would you want to make a record like that, to say what somebody said yesterday? Records become just business cards when you're on the road, and I feel like making a record should come with a greater responsibility than that. Especially given the way it affects people's lives, people deserve more than that.

I feel like if people are gonna invest time and money in what you do, then it has to be good enough. Sometimes I hear other music and think, "Is that finished? Is that good enough?" It's not really for me to even decide, but I do care about my own stuff.

There's nothing wrong with taking your time to make something, although the current trend seems to be the opposite.

Yeah, I'm not against people saying, "This is where I'm at with it." It's the business mechanics that I have a problem with. If you know how the trick's done, you want the trick to be beautiful. You want it to be performed beautifully. If you can see the ears of the rabbit before it's even out of the hat, then it's not fulfilling any purpose. Our show is literally smoke and mirrors, but it's beautiful.

The most important thing is that you do the absolute best you can do. I read a beautiful quote from Samantha Morton about having no regrets. She said she does everything the best she can, given the information she has available at the time. I thought that was a beautiful line, and that's where we stand—we raise the bar as high as we possibly can. Sometimes we don't quite clear it, but we're not lowering the bar.

Selected Jason Pierce:

Spiritualized:

Lazer Guided Melodies (1992)

Pure Phase (1995)

Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space (1997)

Let It Come Down (2001)

Amazing Grace (2003)

Songs in A&E (2008)

Sweet Heart Sweet Light (2012)

And Nothing Hurt (2018)

Spacemen 3:

Sound of Confusion (1986)

The Perfect Prescription (1987)

Playing with Fire (1989)

Recurring (1991)

Name
Jason Pierce

Vocation
Musician