

On enjoying the process no matter the outcome



Musician Johnny Marr (The Smiths) discusses doing the work, the spirituality of craft, and not getting hung up on outcomes.

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As told to J Bennett, 2879 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#).

How would you describe your artistic philosophy?

I've wanted to make music, and I wanted to be a songwriter since being a little boy. I was in bands at 12, 13 years old, and even then, I knew it was my life. At the same time, I feel like it's a privilege to be an artist. Maybe it's because I've come from a working-class background. It's definitely a privilege being successful, and then it's a real privilege that you get to do it for a living.

To have an artistic disposition, though, can sometimes make you a little bit at odds with the rest of the world. When I was a little kid, I couldn't relate to a lot of the things in the area I grew up in. It took a teacher to tell me, when I was 10 or 11, "You need to start thinking like an artist because you are one." That was an amazing thing that happened in my life. I was very lucky.

If people are reading this because they are artists, or aspire to be artists, or want to live an artistic life, it can mean that impulse can sometimes make you feel a little like an outsider. The good news is that I believe whether you're successful or not, if you follow your creative impulses and your ideas, and you develop them and you take them seriously, it can make life make a lot of sense.

I feel very privileged to do that in my life. The way I was to think about music, about colors, about aesthetics and things like that was always different from most of the kids I grew up with. But the world of creativity and artistic endeavor is fantastic. There are some misconceptions about inspiration and the muse, however. I've said this many times before, but when I came across the expression, which I believe was first coined by Pablo Picasso, which is, "Inspiration does exist, but it has to find you working," that has helped me in good stead.

Wise words.

There are misconceptions about, in my case, being a songwriter. A lot of people who are outside of that, who maybe do regular day jobs—people I go to dinner with, or the neighbors or whatever—they quite often have this idea about a songwriter, like you come down the spiral staircase in your dressing gown, you sit at the piano with your acoustic guitar, and you look out across your acres of land, and your garden, and then you just kind of sing your feelings.

The equivalent is someone who goes to a canvas to do a painting, or to a computer, waiting for inspiration to come, and then they say, "This is how I feel—*blah*." Well, your work is going to sound and look like that. Unfortunately, I think there are a lot of examples. I don't want to get too elitist or snobby, but particularly in pop music, and ever more so these days, there are a lot of examples of people singing these very earnest songs

about breakups or how bad they're feeling. That just isn't my bag. But there seems to be this idea in the culture now that if something isn't really, *really* from the heart, it's inauthentic and therefore worthless. I disagree with that.

I feel the same way. Just because something is earnest doesn't make it good. And just because something has some ambiguity or artifice to it doesn't make it bad.

For example, I think there are lots of graphic artists who do great, great work that is conceptual. There's a lot to be said for that. I think craft—in my case, it happens to be in songwriting and making records—is just as spiritual and makes you feel just as good as spilling your feelings out on the page. After a day's craft, even if it doesn't come to something and you go back at it again, when you eventually unlock it and get that work done, it's a great feeling. There's a lot to be said for sticking with it.

First and foremost, try and have an idea before you start. Where the muse or inspiration then comes into it is... I know this has been said many times before, but trust the process. And *enjoy* the process. Don't be so hung up on outcome. When I was producing bands in the '90s, I would tell them, "Hey, don't be afraid to write something that sucks." If you write ten songs, most of them might suck. But if you get three good ones out of that process, that's so much better than getting stuck on the idea of writing the next "Bohemian Rhapsody" or "Stairway to Heaven."

You can polarize yourself with ambition. If you sit down to write a song or a poem or a novel or do a painting, and you put yourself under the kind of pressure that's like, "This has to be amazing out of the gate," two things will happen: One, it will paralyze you, and you probably won't get it done. Two, it's intrinsically amateurish.

How so?

Great writers and great novelists and great musicians know that creativity is work. All the greats know that. Only amateurs think that an idea or inspiration is just going to fall through the sky, and that you're going to be a genius straight away. But I also think people are just too hard on themselves. The Picassos of the world, the Paul McCartneys of the world, and lots of the people that I've been very privileged to work with, they know that it's okay to suck sometimes. It's better to actually just show up and get the thing done. It might not be the next "Stairway to Heaven" or the next "Bohemian Rhapsody" or whatever it is you're trying to write, but just get it done rather than spending three weeks killing yourself and not getting to second base.

When you get stuck in the middle of writing something, do you prefer to hammer on and push through to a conclusion or do you find you get more out of walking away from it for a while and coming back with a fresh perspective?

I like to hammer on and get it done. That doesn't mean you should rush it or be impatient. I'm very fortunate, because doing what I do, there is a matter of deadlines that come into place if I'm making a record. There is the pressure of having members of my band that I employ who have mortgages, and then management and record company who rely on me to deliver. But I'm glad to have that pressure. Again, it's a privilege. It means I'm doing well, but it means I have to deliver. It gives you an endpoint.

So, if I had to choose one or the other, I'd say push on. I think there's something kind of unhealthy about leaving things. If you finish something, you can always go, "Right, there's a song. I finished it." But then a few months later you can always decide you don't like the chorus or something, and you can redo it. But for me, something unfinished is psychologically unhealthy. It's a feeling of not having completed the task.

You believe in writing in bulk as well.

Quantity, quantity, quantity. I think it's much healthier. You get momentum. You get in the rhythm of doing it. You get in the habit of being an artist. I think it was Epictetus or one of the other Stoics who said, "You are what you do." If you are someone who goes and paints every day, you're a painter. If you write prose every day,

you are a writer—whether you get published or not. That’s a separate issue. If you are someone who starts a thing, and then goes, “Oh, I’m not feeling good about myself,” all these insecurities come along, so it becomes “I’m going to go sit in the bar for three hours,” and then the next day, you’re not really feeling up to it, then you’re not a writer. But just take the outcome away from it and embrace the process. Make them two separate things.

Speaking of bars, you quit drinking decades ago. Did anything about your creativity or inspiration change after you’d been sober a while?

Yeah, lots changed. My critical faculties were reliable. I spent less time writing words when I’d had a few drinks that I thought were good but weren’t. I come from Manchester in the late ’70s and early ’80s, where it was the law for young musicians to smoke pot until it came out of your ears. And I produced a lot of work. I was young when the Smiths were making records. But in terms of taking drugs and drinking, I always honored the work and what was coming out of the speakers. I never got fucked up when I was recording and writing. Sometimes, though, just the right amount of hash on an afternoon was enough to make me get into detail on a bass overdub or some technical thing. But everything was about what was good for the track and good for the band.

When I’m asked about being teetotal, I always say, “Listen, if I thought boozing and doing blow or taking any other drugs would make me a better writer, I would do it.” I would, because everything for me is about making me better, feeling more energized, being more reliable, and all of that. It’s been years and years now, but what I learned from getting kind of straight-edge was that it comes back to the theme we were talking about earlier: Inspiration has to find you working.

The gifts of ideas that you get when you weren’t expecting them, whether you’ve been for a run, or you’ve been working on something for three hours, or you pick up a book or whatever, they still come. The good thing when you’re straight is that when they’re good, they’re *good*. You don’t come back to them two days later and go, “Wow, why did I think that was good? That sucks.” When something’s good, when you get excited about something when you’re clean, it’s reliable. I’m very enthusiastic about that.

You’re into meditation as well. Has that facilitated your creativity in any way?

Yeah, it has. You would think that meditation would make me more mellow, but think it just gives me more reliable energy. Don’t get me wrong, there’s lots of times—like everybody else—when I’m feeling lazy or uninspired. But I can tell that meditation has been good for me, and for the people around me, I think. A lot of people don’t like it or can’t do it—just trying to blank out or watch your thoughts for 20 minutes. It’s hard. But that’s why it’s a practice, a discipline. It does get easier.

It’s funny, but I think the reason I like meditation is the reason I used to like getting high as well. Even as a little boy, I’ve always felt there was more going on in the ether than meets the eye. I’d be sat on the bus on the way to school, thinking, “There’s other shit going on here that I’m not seeing.” Of course, when you start doing psychedelics and stuff, you go, “Whoa, there it is.” But then that can become dysfunctional, and plainly just decadent, where you just want more. I got into people like Ram Dass and Aldous Huxley—he’s my hero—not because of the psychedelic stuff but because of the lectures and philosophical stuff he was doing in his later life. For me, all these things are connected under what might loosely be called esoteric. Luckily, I was brought up in an Irish working-class family, so there comes a point where... well, Nick Cave said it best: “Sometimes you’ve just got to do the fucking work.”

I was looking through your recent book, *Marr’s Guitars*, and one of the stories that really stood out was the one about your cherry red 1960 Gibson ES 355. You said the first thing you played on it became the Smiths’ “Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now.” You went on to say that you feel that some instruments come with songs already in them. My question is: Do you think the song that was in that guitar would’ve come out differently if the guitar had landed in someone else’s hands first?

That’s a good question. I think it had to come through me. But just to muddy the waters even more, some of the chords I played on that guitar I don’t even remember learning. Really. Now, some things happen with cognitive

association, and guitars are great for this. Say you get a rockabilly guitar—there's a big gold one in my book. Because you've seen Elvis Presley's guitar player playing it, you'll start playing this kind of rockabilly thing because you have that association with it. In the case of the guitar I wrote "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now" on, it looks kind of like a jazz guitar. Maybe I had these associations where I played those chords, which are really quite jazzy.

Where it gets back to esoteric, though, is that it was a guitar that had been well played from 1960, and it is made from pieces of wood. They are living organic objects, and I think whoever the owner was before me had used the guitar in that way. There's a certain amount of the mechanical thing about the object that made me do that. I didn't have the idea to play that song. Absolutely not. I didn't even know I was going to write a song. I was just thinking, "I've bought this amazing new guitar," and the song happened to be the very first thing that came out. That's happened a few times. Not as many times as I would like, but all musicians who have been lucky enough to have acquired particularly old instruments will know what I'm talking about.

I've talked to a few musicians recently who subscribe to the idea that they're just a conduit or a vessel for what they make. Like with your Gibson—the song is in the guitar itself, and you're just channeling it. What do you think about that?

I think that's right. It goes back to what I was saying when we first started talking: It's absolutely fine to think that craft is also spiritual. No matter how much of a craftsman or craftswoman you are, when you get into a flow, things happen. Crafted doesn't necessarily have to mean premeditated and cold or without some magic in it.

But yeah, I think that's right. You channel it. I've had it plenty of times with riffs and also with words sometimes. It's great when it happens with words because words are such tangible things. Music's a little bit more ephemeral. Now, you can debate it and say it's not something from the ether—it's from your subconscious. Another example is you're asleep and you dream a great song. I've done that so many times. In your dream, this track is so good. In the dream, you think it's already a hit. So, it's got to be living in your subconscious, right? But our conscious minds get so busy with surviving and our egos and all of that stuff. I think people who would debate or deny that channeling is a thing, it's because they don't want to think it's to do with spirituality or it's too esoteric.

Certainly, the subconscious has got tons and tons of ideas that you're not aware of in your regular conscious mind. If you want to think it's from angels, or from aliens, or from entities, or from the collective unconscious, as Carl Jung explained it, I'm on board. I was going to say humans are smarter than they think they are, but I don't know. Maybe they're dumber than they think they are. I'm not sure. All things are true.

Johnny Marr recommends:

Faith, Hope, and Carnage. This is a fairly recent book that's come out, which is Nick Cave in conversation with Sean O'Hagan about process and life and philosophy.

The Center Will Not Hold. This is a documentary about Joan Didion. It's a great introduction and explanation of who she was.

The Doors of Perception. One of Aldous Huxley's most famous books. You can read it in an hour, and it doesn't make you want to run out and take mescaline. It's kind of so you don't have to, really.

The Best of the Four Tops. You might not think you're in the mood to listen to the Four Tops, but it will do you good, especially if it's got "Bernadette" on it.

The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali. This is an old text that's really easy get your head around. It's heady, but not hard to digest. It might not be for everybody, but you might just be waiting for it.

Name

Johnny Marr

Vocation

musician

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