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As told to Grayson Haver Currin, 2175 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Focus, Success, Inspiration.

On the satisfaction of small audiences and simple ideas

Musician Jon Mueller discusses small daily inspirations, redefining success, and being open to change.

I first started listening to your work around 2005, when you were the anchor of the post-rock band Collections of Colonies of Bees but also making these concept-driven abstract albums. Over the years, the concepts have seemed to move into the foreground. Why?

From the get-go, the *ideas* of doing stuff were always of interest to me. Even back when I was really young, in high-school bands and with some of the solo cassettes I did at that time (which are unlistenable), they were concept-driven. The work was *about* something. Going back to the days of Pele or Collections of Colonies of Bees, too, there were always these ideas that Chris Rosenau and I had a lot of fun with. That's how we became such close friends, building these ideas into things. We would sit and talk for hours about how to title something or what pictures to use.

I have done a few records with Asmus Tietchens, the German electronic musician. He's very much about not having recordings tied to any concept. But on some level, even if it's about nothing, *that's* what it's about. When you look back on his work, you know it's his—it has a feeling. That's important: Any work should be recognizable as yours. People have commented that, even though there have been changes within my output, there's a consistent sense that it's me.

Look at, say, Phill Niblock, who's followed a very singular course. He's not trying new, radically different things. It has a very central focus, so it's not as if the next release isn't good or isn't interesting anymore. I've always appreciated someone who's been able to do that. It takes a great amount of skill to pull something like that off and retain interest, or perhaps even grow interest.

Speaking of growing interest: You've made records that appealed to a lot of people—specifically, Volcano Choir. But much of your work is centered on specific ideas for smaller crowds. How do you remind yourself that popular reception isn't the only validation?

Most of my life has been really focused on that. The fact that anyone is interested in anything that anyone does is a big deal. You can't take that for granted. Over time, that doesn't get any easier. The more stuff you do, it's almost more challenging to retain interest. Even if people appreciate what you do—and there's all sorts of artists that I feel this way about—I don't need to buy their next thing because I already have 20 of their previous things. I've got what I need.

Making human connections, that's much easier to do with a smaller audience because you have more control over who that is. A lot of people get into whatever it is they do with this goal of getting big eventually. They're hustling hard, and the bigger the target is, the more people you potentially can pull into your realm. But at the same time, you're also setting yourself up for not effectively dealing with the people you do pull in. You can play for a big room full of people and not really feel anything from that audience, or perhaps even something negative. I've had those feelings. Or you can play for a room of five people and have them in tears—a complete and totally overwhelming engagement.

What's better? What's more important? Are the numbers important, or is that experience more important? I can't deny the significance of numbers, but I know that the experience is much more valuable.

When did you realize that the experience mattered more than the numbers for you?

I just have a somewhat low self-opinion, so I don't have these grand expectations. It's not so much there was an experience that made me embrace that. It was just that thrill of turning an idea into something real. That thrill is the fundamental thing. To know I had this idea and did something with it—and someone, anyone recognized it—that's what it's always been about to me.

Doing something with these ideas often seems like an immersive process for you, whether that's releasing a record like Death Blues' Ensemble with an elaborate art book included or starting labels like Crouton or Rhythmplex that take ambitious approaches to presentation. Was there a moment you realized your projects could be bigger than the mere sound?

After my wife, Teresa, and I got married, we took a belated honeymoon to Europe. We were in Amsterdam where the store Staalplaat used to be. I remember going and just walking around. At that time, music in this realm was very focused on custom packaging. I remember marveling at how a place like that can exist as this hub of all these individuals' creative impulses, materialized and realized.

I walked out of there thinking that my life had changed in so many ways. I saw this clear light that I could follow. Teresa was probably like, "Let's go get coffee," but I was just having this moment of, "Now I know what I have to do." That effort to create that system became, in and of itself, a creative impulse that I became obsessed about. That's how Crouton was born. And then within that framework, it allowed all these other channels for all these other ideas to take place.

And it seems like that commercial-meets-creative impulse galvanized the ideas themselves?

The concepts became helpful to me because I feel like, fundamentally, stories connect with people. That's what people respond to. Not that everyone will, but when you do make that connection, it's very real and effective. It also communicates this understanding between human beings that we're in this moment together. We see something that we acknowledge together. I definitely lean into obscurity and mystery, but I also know people can attach just as easily to shared questioning and wonder.

What does it feel like—mentally, viscerally, emotionally—when an idea strikes you as good enough to pursue?

It's always been the case when pieces start to fall into place relatively quickly or easily. Every day, you could come up with an idea for something, but it doesn't mean necessarily they all should be pursued. But things that are important, they take shape almost like they have this life within them that started to develop because you opened the gate for it. That's not to say that I haven't worked hard at achieving certain things. Thinking an idea up is the first phase, but then does it get injected with this very strong and real sense of drive to fulfill it? That sense of drive happens when things just start lining up, as if they've been waiting to happen.

But there have been ideas that have come up where roadblocks just seem to pile up right off the bat. And it's like, "I'm not going to spend that much time trying to figure this out. I'll just wait for the next thing." I know now from experiences that really great things can happen relatively simplistically, meaning that the pieces can just all of a sudden line up as if they've been waiting for you to find them. That's what I'm interested in. That's when it really becomes clear: Why wouldn't we do this right now? This is exactly what we should be doing. And we will.

Did you have to learn that the hard way, that too many obstacles meant you should redirect your energy?

Well, it wasn't a hard lesson. If it felt like something was getting too labor-focused, I knew maybe this wasn't worth. Any time it starts to feel like there's too much trouble involved, my fear is getting to the other side of it and just feeling like, "I proved *them* wrong." That's not what I want the result of a project to be. A good project is realizing things that have the sense they've been waiting to happen.

But I had a project called Initiation, which I worked on with this choreographer named Dawn Springer and filmmaker Chris Hefner. The Eaux Claires festival invited us to present it. All this stuff worked: We had the idea. We had the right people involved. We created all the elements that we needed to create. And we had a platform. Everybody felt like we accomplished what we set out to.

From there, I thought, "Let's replicate this." But it was just one dead end after another. It came to a certain point where I realized we can't do this, it's not going to happen. It wasn't as if we came up with this idea and were dealing with the struggle of failure right off the bat. It was a totally successful scenario. For some reason, trying to recreate it just absolutely did not work.

Was giving up liberating?

It was liberating to understand that I'm not going to worry about this anymore. But there was a lot of desperation that I felt at the time because I had invested so much time and effort. I remember quickly shifting to book solo tours. It worked, but it felt really rushed. You have to just allow yourself enough space mentally and schedule-wise to accommodate things as they come up. If you're not prepared for change, you're going to hit a wall, be it something ending or you just burning out on a particular project. You've got to keep flexibility in play at all times.

Your most recent album, *Family Secret*, started to take shape during the pandemic when you found boxes of

old recordings you'd never used. How did the experience of listening back to that work feel? Were you familiar to yourself?

As I was finding these CD-Rs, I was thrilled that there were so many. I was interested in seeing old things that were recognizable, a good reminder to sit and remember certain experiences and times. But I was equally as excited about finding unlabeled things where I thought, "I don't know what this is."

There were signs that it was my stuff. In terms of the purpose of making it or the reference point, all of that was gone. I was finding enough of it that I felt like I wanted to see if I could make something. Had I found this stuff last year or any time in the past, it wouldn't have been relevant to me. Relevance in the past was geared toward making something new that could easily be reproduced live.

But the pandemic has given you a chance to circumvent that self-imposed limitation?

Right now, I don't have to think about how I am going to take parts of this and use it in a live context so there's some reference to the recording. Maybe music has become too much of a format in terms of how I think about it. In terms of creating it, it's being so focused on utilitarianism. I thought, "Have I been missing out on something all this time?" I've been so focused on the ability to perform, the ability to recreate something live.

I know it was important before, and I know it will be someday again. But it's making me think about what kinds of rooms we paint ourselves in. There's something there that I need to just sit with and digest for a while, because there's definitely a lesson.

Jon Mueller Recommends:

FIVE THINGS THAT INSPIRE ME

Home inspires me. The place where we've mostly been isolated for so long isn't something to escape from when the time comes. It's the physical manifestation of our lives, and like life, I can work on it, put more into it, and take care of it. In return, it gives me a sense of place and a feeling that the world is good.

My wife's laugh inspires me. I don't mean this in a sappy sentimental way, but seeing joy in another person, particularly Teresa, fills me with a very particular light. It takes weight off. It reminds me that we can laugh and feel good.

The sound of drums inspires me. Fancy playing, while impressive and inspiring in its own right, doesn't cover the whole thing. The sound of a struck drum, cymbal, or gong—its tone peaking and dissipating into silence, or piled into a dense cluster of frequencies and tones—is a thing of wonder. What does it mean, and how can it be used? The quest continues.

My relationship with our cat, Spooky, inspires me. It offers a sense of purpose to help another being get through the day. Providing it some enjoyment through attention and play can surprisingly motivate me in times where laziness or boredom might set in.

Interactions like this one inspire me. It's an opportunity to speak and write my thoughts and think about clarity and intention on a deeper level. Ultimately, communication can offer inspiration to become a better person.

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