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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2664 words.

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On redefining what it means to be successful

Musician Kristian Matsson (The Tallest Man On Earth) discusses not taking anything for granted, escaping the trap of self-pity, and learning from your past self.

You play different instruments, but I'm curious to know about your relationship with your voice and with singing. I've been listening to your albums and I've noticed how it's changed. Was singing something that you were comfortable doing from the beginning? How has this relationship with your voice evolved over the years?

I've been comfortable with singing all the time. I come from a garage rock and punk background. So in the beginning, I didn't care about singing pretty, and I am super grateful that I have this thing in my life that I can express myself in such an abstract way. Even if I write a song and have the lyrics, the song can be different every night because I can sing it in a different way. In the early records, I was super into lo-fi recordings, so I would record myself on these old tape recorders that always weren't true to speed or pitch when you played it back. And the recordings had a special timbre.

But then also at the beginning when I started playing as Tallest Man on Earth, I played in very small venues with really bad PAs or not a PA at all. And I came from a punk background where I just needed to be heard. And I would project my voice just to make it cut through. And it worked. I could put on a little rock show, even though I was seemingly a little singer-songwriter. But I could run around, I could yell because I had to, that was the only way to be heard. But over the years, I've started to play at bigger venues with great PAs where I don't have to yell. And I would happily adapt to that because then I could finally have some dynamics and have so many different voices that we have throughout music history that I love that I could try to be inspired from.

You also are good at engaging with the audience and working with the crowd. Is there something that you learned throughout the years on how to engage with the audience?

When I played in a rock band I didn't have to play guitar. I could literally be out in the crowd and I could be very close to the audience. So I took that with me when I started playing this kind of music. I don't consider a show where it's just me standing on stage, singing any song, and expecting people to just witness that. My philosophy around any show is that it can't happen without us all being in the same room. I can't just close my eyes and sing the songs, I need to ride the energy of the whole room.

The show is created by everyone in the room. And that's why some songs sound different. I play an old song with a slightly different energy because that is the energy of the room. Because if I connect to the energy of the room, then my performance will be more powerful. It's really important to me to make people feel like they're a part of the show. And it's something that on another scale, it's a pretty amazing thing that a stranger and I can stare into each other's eyes. It's a safe space to do that because I can't really do that in the street. But at a show, I can do that. And it's okay for everyone to stare at me. It's a different type of meeting that I don't have access to anywhere else.

In your previous albums, you were mostly working solo, and part of it was because you thought that you didn't know what you were doing, so you would prefer to do everything yourself. Is there freedom in creating from an unknown place? How was that process of allowing others to join and share creative experiences, energy, and collaboration?

In the early days, when I just started, I had a creative freedom that I am now constantly working to find. And I do find my way back to it, but now it's a more deliberate process of trying to trick myself into getting into that state of just playfulness and not caring about anything. When I started doing The Tallest Man on Earth songs, I had no plan of releasing them or thought this would be a career because I was in a rock band. I was just having fun on the side. I was listening to a lot of folk music and old field recordings. I was just having fun and not thinking about what it would become.

When I was younger, I was skateboarding a lot. I was listening to music and skateboarding. There were two songs, that are widely different: DJ Shadow's "Building Steam With a Grain of Salt," and Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice It's All Right." And I remember skateboarding to them and they made me just stop. And the world felt so cool. I would look at the horizon and be like, "Wow, the world..." That feeling of just the world getting bigger just from a song. Then I toyed with it like, "Maybe I can do that one day, I'm just going to do the things that I feel most passionate about." And I did that and I had this beautiful freedom of creativity because there was no product, or it was just having fun or just having an outpour of somewhere to channel anxiety and how weird life is. It was just this amazing thing. And then someone asked me to do a show and I did it, I wrote more songs, I released albums, and then here I am.

Now, I sit in the studio and I hear myself write a song and say to myself, "Oh, this is good, Kristian, yeah, this is great," and then I realize that I'm making a cover of myself on an old song that worked in the past, and I have to fight that. I have to forget that I have a career. Forget about all the things that have been given to me. I come from a country where we are very well taken care of. And I had a lot of jobs and I've gotten security from what I do. But I just have to forget about that when I create. I can't think about, "Oh, you have a very secure and great life and people like you. So write stuff that will keep that going." Because that never works.

Then I catch myself and I realize, "Oh, this is bullshit. This is not great." It can become a self-torturous, this greater process of having to deal with your little ghosts and fears all the time. And that has probably also led to not having the greatest confidence. If you have to spend time with your own thoughts things get harder, all the best things happen when you don't listen to your thoughts. When you're in the moment, in the flow.

I have so many talented friends. They write amazing songs and are great, amazing musicians. And I never thought of myself as that. So then it was just easier instead of like, "Oh, I could book that great studio and I could ask these people if they want to play on this record" to be more like, "I'm not sure if this song is good, so I'll just do it myself."

So that's been the process. And I'm happy with every album I made because it's been a little snapshot of what happened there and then. But then I came to a point during the pandemic when, after a while of not writing at all, I was just stuck on my little farm in Sweden and didn't see any people, and I realized that writing music has always been me being inspired by interactions with other people. With friends, strangers, and things that have happened with friends, strangers, or lovers.

And, for most of my adult life, I've been traveling and at one point I didn't do it, so I just stopped writing because everything I wrote was just dark and depressing, and no one wanted to hear that. I realized that I was going to get to do it again. Life is too short to fall into self-pity of just thinking you're not good. So, for the first time, I asked the people that I look up to, and we went to this amazing studio. From that moment, it was just something that just let go of me, let go of myself and felt this new freedom and felt this confidence, and could just lean into this amazing thing that is creating together with others.

There's stuff that I would never have been able to imagine, myself, from my creativity. It's beautiful, it wasn't hard at all, because people were super into playing. I was just at that point when I realized I was going to get to do this again, I was going to get to tour again, then something else happened. I don't care if I'm popular, I'm just going to do this. I'm a lifer in this. I'm going to do this forever.

You mentioned this fact of realizing that you were creating a song, but it was a cover of what you previously created. How were you able to fight or break that habit of redoing the same thing?

I would just throw those songs away. I found this weird indicator in me when I know that something is what I think is a good song. It's always when I sit and I play something that I'm feeling really good in my body when playing it. But then also a little ashamed, I feel like almost blushing, like, "This is stupid. This is silly. I could never record this." And I have many of those on my new album. But I've learned over the years when I get that feeling of shame and that's silly, that it's good. But there's something in me, call it ego or whatever, that just wants to be safe, just wants to not push in any new direction or show real emotion or just do something that's safe. And that is the part of you that wants to write covers of yourself, and who gets upset inside of you when you try to go with what you want to do.

On your most recent album, *Henry St*, there's a song that has the same name that is about being a person in this world. What was the process of writing this song?

Well, when I write a song, it's not just about me. My personal life is in there, but it's also a lot from observing the world around me. And that's why it's in "*Henry St*," because I was observing a lot of people from the windows of my apartment, and spending time with others in different careers in the city. That's how the song starts, just living in this society where individualism has been the work and the path in capitalism, where you need to be important, and you need to sell your brand. In this view, success is that

you are seen. It sounds lame coming from a white middle-aged man who has had success, but I still observe that. And then it's not working out, it's those struggles and we find success and we're still not happy, we don't know what we're looking for because we're chasing this thing that we think is happiness.

I used to live a very conditional life. I just needed to figure out the place where, the right family situation, and the right love, and then after that, I would be happy. But you just walk around being miserable, because you'll never really get to a point where life is super easy. So the song it's about that struggle. I'm trying to still be hopeful in a pretty messed up world. And then in that song, there is some glimmer of hope out there that is not expressed in the lyrics, it's in the piano outro. But there's something thankfully stubborn in your head that still believes in true love, in the good man, the good in yourself.

You have been thinking about what success looks like.

With this new peace and confidence in my life, I know what is important. Success to me is that now, I sit on this great tour bus, my crew is some of my dearest friends, my front of house, my sound engineer. That is success, that we get to have a very cool job that we get to do together. And I can employ people that get to do what they love and what they're good at. Success is that we can play in many venues and that so many people come to my shows. That is enabling many of us to do the job we love. In the beginning, or when my career took off around, I was playing solo with a very small crew. I remember this vividly. The first time I played at the Sydney Opera House I was just there myself with this little crew. Then after the show, there was no one in there, I was just by myself in the green room, because my little crew had to get all the stuff and there was no one to celebrate this moment with. I was just like, "Oh, so this is success. This is actually not that fun."

I can imagine you in the green room.

It looks probably what you're thinking. It's like a massive Steinway, with a grand piano in there and champagne and a champagne bucket. And there's a panoramic view over the bridge and you're just like, "Okay, well, I can tell people now that I played here, and they will think it's grand and all, but this is not creating peace in me or anything, or feeling better than I did before." So the next time I went to Sydney Opera, I had a full band, probably because of that moment where I was just like, "I need to have some camaraderie in this, someone to share these things with." So that has been success for me, to have amazing people around me to do this together.

At a show at the Music Hall of Williamsburg, you also mentioned that in 2008 you played there for the first time when you were the opening act for Bon Iver. If you could go back and say something to 2008 you, what would you say to him?

Well, it was also such a lovely and way scarier time. I didn't know what I was doing. But I do take inspiration from that little guy. Because I was ashamed of playing some of my earlier songs, not on stage, I always feel great playing them. I was just a little ashamed because young 22-year-old Kristian didn't know English so well and just made these songs to play them. But I realized that in 2008 Kristian was also kind of fearless. Just saying yes to that, to work. I had never toured in America before and never played in that kind of venue before. But I said yes to it and I did it, and I wrote those songs just because I didn't care. Young Kristian has been a good inspiration to just, to get back to that, that's that state of fearlessness. I should be inspired by that little dude.

Kristian Matsson Recommends:

Jan Johansson's Jazz på svenska

Merlin Bird ID app

Swedish Lapland – the Arctic part of Sweden!

Air-fried pointed cabbage with butter

Independence Day and Independence Day: Resurgence

Name

Kristian Matsson


Vocation


singer, songwriter, musician, The Tallest Man on Earth

Fact

Shervin Lainez

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