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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3582 words.

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On getting out of your own way

Real Estate's Martin Courtney on songwriting, not second guessing yourself, and what it means to try and age gracefully within the confines of a rock band. Something that I've talked about many times with so many of my friends who are musicians—especially after being several albums deep into your career—is the notion of second guessing yourself or changing your process arbitrarily simply for the sake of change. I think about the mental traps that people fall into. "I don't want to repeat myself, but I also want to give people what they want" or "I want to do something different, but not so different that it alienates people." How do you avoid those kinds of pitfalls when it comes to making a new record?

I think this record is different because this is the first album where I feel like I was able to approach it from a place of self-awareness. I feel like the first couple records we made, I didn't really know how to change my style and I didn't really care to. And I think we kind of naturally evolved—and I hopefully got better at songwriting. I think I did? We got better as a band and the actual quality of the recordings improved and things like that, but it was all very gradual. And then I think we started to notice people being, "It sounds like Real Estate."

I don't think people were saying that necessarily in a derogatory way, but more like, "This band keeps putting out records and they're consistently pleasant and good and they all sound the same." So that started to get frustrating because I didn't really feel it. Obviously living in it, actually being in the band, I felt like each record was very different, so it starts to feel a little weird when it doesn't feel that way for other people. It kind of culminated with the last record that we made, *The Main Thing*. We really wanted to prove that we could stretch ourselves. Among other things, we were thinking about the fact that we listen to so many different types of music ourselves. We were just trying to sprinkle some different sounds into the record. The whole point of that album, at least for me, had to do with the fact that it was our 10th year as a band and it was our fifth album. And I was just like, "I want to make something that feels big and special and important for us." I wanted it to be a big messy album full of lots of different ideas. And that's what we made.

I think it's a cool album, but then it came out just as Covid happened. we couldn't tour and it was all a big letdown. It was all very traumatic and it kind of freaked me out. And then because we couldn't tour and I was already having these existential weird thoughts about being a musician and having just fallen into it as a career and now I've got kids and whatever, it quickly became, "Who am I?" And then "Who am I if I can't tour, if I can't even make money from this thing? Am I still a musician?" These are the thoughts that I was having.

So then I made a solo record. I just kept writing music, because that's what I do, and it was ostensibly for Real Estate. Then as the pandemic dragged on and on, I was finally just like, "I'm just going to take these songs and just record them on my own and just to have something to do."

It turned out to be a good thing. The stakes were much lower because I don't really expect anyone to listen to or care about my solo stuff. I'm doing it just to make music and I know that it's a much smaller platform. I was just working in a kind of stream of consciousness way, going with the first thought that I had regarding lyrics and with each decision I was making, and almost improvising a lot of the guitar parts.

So, I had a lot of fun doing it. And I guess it changed the way I thought about songwriting. Now, in a way, I don't care as much. I just am sort of less precious about it. So for this record I wanted to make a pop album. I wanted three and a half minute pop songs, which on its face feels like lower pressure to me. We worked so hard on that last Real Estate record only for it to kind of blow up in our face. The ambitions we had for it felt, in some ways, unrealized. So for this record, a simpler approach felt like a real choice.

I like that *Daniel* still feels thoughtful, but not overwrought. There is an immediacy to it.

Yes. We were talking a lot about just not thinking too hard and doing what felt natural to us—to let Real Estate be Real Estate, which is something that we kept saying. We wanted to really just be ourselves. The trick, of course, is to just being yourself is actually knowing who you are. This many years into making records together, I think we've finally figured that out. And it seems silly, but it was a nice kind of north star for us to just be like, "If it feels good, let's just go with it and just have fun." And everything about this record felt like it just came so naturally. In that way, I find it hard to find anything that I don't like about it. I didn't think too hard about it. I keep saying I had to learn how to not care as much, which is honestly true, but I know that sounds bad. I just mean I wasn't agonizing over every single thing the way I had while making previous records. Sometimes if you don't think as much, it just comes out better.

That makes a lot of sense. I was having this same thought process recently while interviewing for jobs. It wasn't that I didn't care about getting the job, but I went into interviews with the mindset of, 'I'm just going to not care so much. If they like me, great, and if they don't, then it wasn't meant to be anyway, and it is for the best.' I did so much better after that.

Yes, but you can't force that mindset, you know what I mean? I think you have to be in the right place and circumstances in your life and to maybe have been doing it for a while and be able to see through the bullshit a little bit. Then it's easier to come to a place of, "I know what I'm good at. I'm going to play to those strengths and hopefully people are going to like it, but I can't control their reaction. I can't make people like it. All I can do is my best." That is very freeing.

For a lot of creative people, the pandemic was this incredibly leveling event. While it was incredibly destructive to everyone's livelihood, I know a lot of people that had the experience of really reconnecting to their creative work in interesting ways. There was a feeling of, 'Well, I might as well just do the thing that feels good right now because it doesn't matter and maybe no one will ever care again.'

Yeah, one-hundred percent. It was both illuminating and very scary.

I know it can be tiresome for people when you make something and they're like, 'Yep, this sounds like another Real Estate record,' but I do think that there's something really incredible about bands that almost become their own genre in a way, that just fully inhabit their own aesthetic. I think of someone like Sade. She is her own genre.

I think it's true. I am not comparing myself in any way to the great Sade, but I do think it's a similar thing where it's like your personality is just being expressed. You can't help it. It's you. It just comes out naturally. I actually feel really fortunate that we have that. I don't think that it's a bad thing at all for a band to have a specific sound. I think it's just an easy thing for people to latch onto. I like it that someone could hear our music and within five seconds be like, 'Yeah, that's Real Estate.' I don't really even know how that happens, but it's cool.

I think of a band like a band like Beach House. That's a complaint that gets lobbed at them a lot, that there is a sameness to everything they do. But to me, that is what makes them great—they just go deeper and deeper into their own world. They are their own genre. They have an almost singular aesthetic.

Beach House is always the example that I bring up when I'm talking about this. I love that band. I haven't read all of their reviews, so maybe this is a complaint that always gets made about them, but to my ears they just get better and better. There is a deepening to their sound because they just fully lean into it. Such a great band.

I will preface this by saying that I think this is a genuine compliment, but one thing I admire about the music you've made—both in your solo records and with Real Estate—is that there is a remarkable unfussiness in your lyrics that I really admire. There is a clarity to these ideas and sentiments that I always appreciate — a simplicity that cuts right to the heart of things. It always feels to me like your songs really touch on these quiet moments or simple ideas that reverberate in such a profound way. Not that there's anything wrong with complicated concepts or big statements, but I think it's nice to be reminded that everything doesn't always need to be wrapped in a million metaphors.

I'm really very happy to hear that. Lyrics are super hard. One thing I have learned, which goes hand in hand with what I was saying earlier, is that I have started to not think as hard about them. It really starts with just me listening to the music and approaching it in a very stream of consciousness way. Usually I'll latch onto a phrase or something that sounds cool, which just might be nonsense, and then try to build something around that. And it's important to me that the lyrics are not silly or dumb because A, I'm self-conscious about it and B, you also want to provide some substance, something that people can really chew on, especially if it's a pop song.

Also, it's easy for me to be like, "Well, my life is so banal and boring. I just drive my kids to school and make lunches and pick them up and drive them to soccer." Literally, I'm just a stay-at-home dad 99% of the time and even more so over the last few years. I haven't been traveling and the band had come to a halt until recently. So it is hard to be like, "What can I write about?" and then just allowing myself to be okay with just writing about my everyday life.

It's nice to be reminded that there is value in what. Most of us are just living everyday lives, but there is also deep meaning in that, in the day to day of what it means to be a person.

I am a pretty private person, so I do try to obscure things a little bit. Also, I have been in a pretty confused and messed up head space the past few years, and it's been a rough couple years. So I think there's a lot of darkness in this record and maybe that's my outlet for expressing it. I do enjoy the juxtaposition of the sort of poppiness of the melodies with the lyrics, which can be a little darker or more introspective. I don't even necessarily go into a song with an idea of what it's going to be about, but hopefully I figure it out by the time I finish the lyrics and it makes itself clear to me. I have always admired songs that I can listen to and be like, "Oh yeah, this is about *this*"—where there's a clear message or a clear notion that's being conveyed. It is something I strive for, though I don't know if it always works. I really do care about this stuff, so I really do appreciate your kind words about it.

I had a poetry teacher who would always ask, "What is this trying to be about? What is this poem trying to do?" when he read our work. I think that can be applied to pretty much anything—if you're a screenwriter, if you're a songwriter, if you're novelist—it always feels valuable to take a step back and examine your own intentions. Things can quickly become muddled if you have a million interesting ideas and you try to use all of them, all the time, which is something I think a lot of people do.

Actually that does come back to one of the overarching ideas that I wanted to explore with this record—to really make everything as simple as possible, to really strip away anything extraneous and just make everything really concise. I was mostly thinking about that with the music because it just felt like those were the best songs. Sometimes you listen to the most perfect song you've ever heard, and you're like, "This is so simple it's almost dumb. How did this person decide that this was finished?" and think "I could never do this because it's so simple." And that was trying to achieve that with a lot of these songs. I don't even know if we necessarily succeeded in that, but we tried.

Fifteen years is an admirably long time to be in a band. How has the dynamic of the band – and the creative relationships within it—changed over the years?

Well, over the years, I would say we've just learned how to do it. When we started, we were really young, and I didn't know anything about writing songs or being in a band or touring or anything. It was all very new to me. There's a certain freedom to being young and not knowing what you are doing, but I also think there's a nice freedom that comes with having done it for a little while. It's only been 15 years, but as you say, that is actually a long time for a band. So I think that's what has allowed us to, at this point in our career, to make the record that we made and to feel less precious about certain things. That's part of it.

Before the last record came out, the lineup had been steady for a few years, and then our drummer decided he didn't want to tour, which is very understandable. So he left the band on very good terms, but we've had to find a new drummer. So now we've got Sammi Niss and this is her first record with us. She's been in the band basically since before the last record came out, but we never got to do a lot with her. For us I think it's this thing of either finding people that you can really connect with as if you've been friends since you were kids, or actually just being in a band with people that you were friends with since when you were a kid. So there's this stability to it that is nice, and it doesn't feel like there's any pressure to do anything. We don't need to make a record if we don't want to. We're just kind of being active when we feel like it, which I know is a kind of luxury.

How valuable is it to you as a songwriter to be able to make records of your own or to know that not everything has to be for Real Estate?

Honestly, I don't look at these things as binary. I feel like I just write songs. And then depending on the circumstances, if it doesn't make sense for the band to make a record, then I'm just writing songs and I'll make a solo record. But honestly, I don't know if I'll ever do that again, because those were two very specific circumstances for when I did those two solo records. I really do think that this band is a perfect outlet for me. I just write. And then I honestly feel very fortunate to have a group of people that I can bounce these songs off of and that are accomplished great musicians that want to play my songs. I'm learning how to not take that kind of stuff for granted. You don't just get to have a band or to put records out. I'm so lucky that I've been able to make these records. You know, I don't have the money to pay for studio time. I need a label to do that. Again, I just feel super fortunate to be able to do this... and to *still* be doing this.

For any musician to be able to make records and tour right now, when the business is in such shambles, it is something to be thankful for.

I am grateful. And then at other times I'm bummed. It is so hard to make money and it's hard to keep everything afloat. Part of me thinks, 'Oh, I wish we were more successful. I wish this or that.' but it's important to keep everything in perspective. For years I thought, 'Oh, I'll just make records forever!' and I probably still will. I'll always want to make music, but you also can't just assume that someone's going to want to put that record out or someone's going to want to hear it. But that's fine too. I can just make music at my house, and I'm always going to because it is something that I like to do. Things ebb and flow, and that's also totally fine and completely out of my control. I just try to stay grounded and grateful. We just made what is probably our best record. At least I think it's our best record, and maybe people will like it or maybe they will just not hear it. And again, I really have no control over that, but I feel fortunate to be able to do it. You just have to make peace with the idea that you never know what's going to happen in the future. There may come a day when I am just doing this for myself. It's

always going to be different. That's where my head is at these days, which feels like a healthy way to think about things.

How do you feel about touring again at this point in your life?

Well, we're touring throughout the spring and then it's kind of up in the air. We're trying to book stuff in the fall, and basically I'm the holdout. It's hard for me to commit because of my whole home life situation. It's hard. I've got kids and I'm just like, 'God, this is a lot.' Basically I'm in a particularly weird spot right now just because we haven't started touring yet and we're just about to, and I'm kind of freaking out about it because it's been so long.

Basically the rest of the year is just touring on this record. And then make another record, I think? We can still make more records. I am always tempted to say, 'If I could just make records and not tour, I would do that.' But actually we did that the last time, due to Covid, and that wasn't very satisfying. So I do think having a certain amount of touring is going to feel awesome. I have no doubt that it's going to be really, really nice to get to share this with people in a physical environment and talk to people after the show and see what songs people like. All of that stuff is going to feel really good. But it's harder now, it's less of a given that I'm going to just want to peace out for a year and tour a record. I've got to choose my traveling wisely.

That's where most of my musician friends are at right now. Many of them have kids now. And even if you don't, going out to hit the road as a touring musician playing a mid-sized venue is much different now than it used to be. Also, touring is less of a novelty as you get older. It takes a toll.

Yeah, it's getting older, and honestly, the time to financial reward ratio is a bit intense depending on where you're at in your career, who you are as a band, and how famous you are. It's a little tough to justify the amount of commitment that it takes to what you're getting in return, other than the intangible things. Being a working musician is amazing, but also incredibly tricky.

Albums by Real Estate:

Real Estate (2009)

Days (2011)

Atlas (2014)

In Mind (2017)

The Main Thing (2020)

Daniel (2024)

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