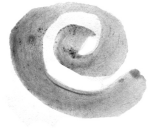


On getting out of your own way



Musician Matthew Cooper on the difference between creation and intention, letting your work dictate what it wants to be, and how being an artist is like being a human-sized tuning fork.

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As told to Alfie Palao, 2142 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

What was the impetus for releasing your most recent record with sheet music attached?

Ever since [An Accidental Memory in the Case of Death](#) and [Copia](#), people have been requesting sheet music. I don't consider myself to be this amazingly gifted piano player, but I get that I have a certain sense of melody that people appreciate. I generally try to keep it pretty simple when I approach things in such a stark manner, instrumentally. I don't like revisiting something that I've already created; I'd much rather be spending that energy towards something new. So creating sheet music was always on the back burner for me.

When I decided to turn this new material into an album, it only made sense to go ahead and take the time to do the sheet music as well. And now that I've done it, it feels amazing. I think it's because I also made it to look like the books that I learned on as a kid, so it's very heartwarming to hold it in my hand.

What are your thoughts on making the work open and available for other people to learn from or take on?

When I was growing up, there was such a sense of mystery with artists that I was into. It's hard to imagine my own music ever being something like that. So one aspect of that is I think it's really awesome being able to demystify anything that you're doing. Sharing stuff with people, like "This record was just made with this crappy keyboard and a guitar, and this one Moog pedal." I love that kind of stuff. Eluvium didn't exist until I started realizing that there was a space for my music to exist. And that changed my life, just hearing one-man-band type people doing instrumental music and realizing it's okay to do that, and people care about this type of thing.

But having said that, I don't ever want to over explain what I do, either, because I think that destroys it. Part of what is so wonderful about certain types of art and music is the disengagement and allowing the person who is consuming it, whether it's viewing a painting or listening to a piece of music or reading a book, to spur their own imagination and allow them to create their own unique take on it. It's a really fine line to walk. You want to be open and accessible and inspiring and show people a person using some cheap gear, but at the same time, you want it to take them away to a place that is the total antithesis of that.

Keith Richards always talks about mysticism in rock and roll music, in particular, but there does seem to be a lot of opaqueness or mythic auras around ambient musicians, bolstered in part by social media. How does Eluvium figure into this?

I don't overthink it. Everything I post is just sort of a whim. Like, "Oh, it's a nice day outside, let's post something about this." I try to make everything be a celebration of the thing itself as opposed to trying to decide how it should come across in relation to anything else that's out there.

What are your thoughts on how your music can get grouped in these sort of algorithmic playlists, such as the "Deep Focus" playlist on Spotify?

I actually really love that. It's just a single take on the intention, but that is nonetheless a form of the intention of the music. I try to always have a level of scholasticism to it, and ultimately, I always want it to be a form of comfort to people. At the end of the day, if I have to resign to being a certain thing, I want to be able to provide a level of comfort. I think "focusing" could do the same thing, because when I'm creating something, I want it to be under the covers in your bed, in a little fort in your own world. The feeling is to be in a realm of understanding and thought processes where you're able to push through anything, because you're unconcerned.

Do you find it helpful for yourself to be in this kind of state when you're composing new music?

I go into that state because of the fact that I'm creating, as opposed to needing to be in that state in order to create. In interviews, people always ask how I come up with a song. One time I heard someone else say something about how songs are just floating around in the wind, and that you just have to reach out and grab one, or you just have to be patient and allow it to come to you.

But I've recently realized that I'm a sort of tuning fork. I'm being inundated by experiences in life just by living through it. But when you touch the fork to a surface, it allows that built up vibration to release into something else. So touching an instrument is basically me releasing that nervous energy, and it allows me to calm myself. That's the initial spark of creation. And after that, I've gotten myself into more of a zone where I'm able to breathe with the music and feel the rhythm of where it wants to go, naturally. It all initially sparks from just an intense, pent-up energy, and a need to expel it.

In the process of making new music, what dictates the approach you have to creating on a guitar or piano?

It's whatever I'm feeling in the moment, and that's why my releases seem to sometimes jump all over the place. Because I don't want to overthink it, which would ruin it. Some of the songs on this recent album are over 10 years old, and some of them I wrote right before I finished the record, so they've just been interspersed. Solo piano is such a different thing from what I normally do, and that work does come few and far between. A melody or an idea or an urge to just sit at the piano and start playing and have that be only what it is, happens less than what I normally otherwise do. I tend to go for a synthesizer or a bunch of pedals or modulator or just a group of noises. I let the thing be what it's going to be and try not to get in the way too much.

Your previous album, Shuffle Drones, allowed someone to play that record for 13 minutes, hours, or ostensibly forever if they don't miss a payment. The way in which it's supposed to be experienced is only possible via streaming services specifically. Was there a lot of thought into playing with newer mediums?

That record was very considered and thought over and mulled over for a while. For me, intention and creation are two different things, and they come at different times. Intention sometimes comes in the process of making something, but it could also come after making something, because I don't know what it is until it's done. With *Shuffle Drones*, an intention was certainly decided, and then I went through many steps in order to try to figure out the best way to achieve what I wanted. The original concept was actually for something like 131 one-second tracks. It was interesting and fun and schizophrenic to create that, but there was something calming in its schizophrenia.

At the end of the day, it was a thought experiment. By figuring that out, I was able to achieve a certain effect. I then thought, "How can I apply this new language to something that I feel like could be put to better use rather than it being just a pure thought experiment or just nothing but a concept? How could I apply this in a manner in which it can actually be something with care and a little more thought put into it?" And that's how that one came to be.

I tend to spend way too much time thinking about what something means and what the intention is when I'm not

creating. Generally when I am actually creating, I try to leave intention at the door because creation is such a strange thing. To add purpose to it sometimes detracts from the higher concept. That's certainly not always the case, but it can confuse the act of doing it. That's not to say that the consideration can't come beforehand or afterwards, or maybe for some people even during the process. But for me, I certainly try to set out to do something, or set out to do nothing, and then see what it is.

Does the medium in which someone listens to your music matter to you?

It does, but sometimes I'm all over the place with how I wanted my records to be listened to, especially with Pianoworks. That was a big hurdle for me in its creation. At the end of the day, for me, that record is most enjoyed listening to it on a hi-fi stereo turntable. But I recognize that that's not the way that most people consume music these days, and that's okay. Having it on a little tape player or streaming it through a little speaker or what have you is also fine. The way in which somebody listens to something has a lot more to do with its intended tonality as opposed to the place in which the person is at when they're consuming it.

If somebody's going to listen to something on their phone, I wish I could be the person that chooses the headphones they use. Because if I mixed a record with a certain pair of headphones, I make those choices of what tonality and what is going to happen in the middle of a song based off of the frequency response of the headphones that I am choosing to use. So you can put on a pair of headphones that cost a million dollars, but they won't have the correct frequency response. Or you can put on some earbuds and they certainly would not.

Has living with someone who paints affected the way you approach music?

Living with [my wife, artist Jeannie Lynn Paske] definitely has. She's a very uncompromising artist with her vision. Even though I can be so specific about what it is that I want to do, I think there's still something about her process and her methodology and her work ethic that I've learned a lot from. Just being married to and living with another artist and working day to day with a person that's constantly doing something that's inspiring to you—but in a completely different medium—is just amazing. I'm an extremely lucky person to have that.

You recorded a bit of older material for this release, how did that come about? What about this older material has changed for you over time that you felt the need to re-record?

I think the reason is because I have changed over time. I'm not who I was when I wrote those songs and I never will be again. And as I grow and adapt, I think music should also grow and adapt. For a person who creates music that is so based on repetition, I find repeating myself to be extremely dull. So if I'm going to revisit something, I want to revisit it in the place that I am now, at least from an artistic standpoint, as opposed to trying to recreate exactly what it was but just recorded in a different manner. I mean, those other songs can still continue to exist the way that they were then, and I think that they're not my favorite recordings. I've always had a love-hate relationship with it. A lot of people really loved those works.

I think any artist always struggles with something when they're done with it, especially if they no longer like it and they want to move on. With *Pianoworks*, just because it's so stark, it's very easy to be concerned with how it comes across. So why not take the opportunity to do things in the way that you would do them now if you would have had the opportunity to do them that way then? Or just to take a new approach to it and feel them out and see what they mean to you now.

Matthew Cooper Recommends:

Frank O'Hara poems

The Tanners by Robert Walser

walking for long periods of time

plants / animals

water

Name

Matthew Cooper

Vocation

Musician

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