

# On learning how to set yourself free



Musician Michael Berdan on the value of collaborating with people who are better than you, the comforting influence of horror films, working with electronics, and why coming to terms with your own negative thoughts can set you free.

October 1, 2019 -

As told to Hether Fortune, 3694 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Adversity](#), [Mental health](#).

**Uniform recently released a second collaborative album with The Body, and you have a long history of working in creative partnerships before you started Uniform with Ben Greenberg. Why do think collaboration has been such an important part of your creative process?**

In a lot of ways, it plays into some of my insecurities as someone who makes music. I've always managed to tie myself into bands or with other musicians who have a way more natural ability than I do because I'm not a natural player. I can write a riff, but I can't fucking play guitar, that kind of shit. I have a lot of talented friends who I've gotten very close with over the years. Early on with making music, I would very consciously try to play with people who I know were far better than me so that even if I sucked, the band would be good. My friends happen to be in this community of creative people, and so it's largely just an extension of us spending time together.

The Body collabs, for instance, happened after touring for a long time together and getting really close. We were hanging out and bouncing ideas off of each other. Fortunately we were working with Seth Manchester, who's a tremendous producer, and Ben Greenberg, my bandmate, who is also a tremendous producer, and they can just chip away at the garbage and make it sound like something cohesive. So as far as collaborating goes, it's just an excuse for me to do two things: to glom onto people who I think are better at music than me so I can exploit their abilities, and so that I can hang out with my friends.

**I mean, at least you own the fact that you may not have the chops required to make the kind of music you want to make, and so you have to rely somewhat on others to get that part of the work done, and you're giving those people credit. It seems like you're maybe more of a writer than a musician. You seem to put a lot of thought into your lyrics, titles, and overall concepts.**

Absolutely. I definitely devote a lot of time to what I do. I put in the energy. The aesthetic craft is something that's tremendously important to me. It's something that I think does create a lot of the ambiance of the projects that I'm involved with. Over time, I think it's something that I've gotten pretty good at. I absolutely have a role, and my role is largely to shape an aesthetic. I know I was just putting myself down there pretty hard as a musician, but I've been doing this for a long time. Over the years, I have developed a bit of a knack for certain musical twists. I write a lot of the songs that we play in Uniform and in the collabs.

**Is your brain more suited to working in electronic music than, say, with guitars?**

It is. I came up in punk and hardcore but in my late teens, early 20s, I started to spend a lot of time at goth industrial clubs, and that got me into techno, post-punk, et cetera. And since I knew I wasn't good at sitting down and writing songs with an instrument, I thought maybe I could use this electronic equipment. I've gotten good with step sequencers, and diligently plugging in notes. I have this intense love for bubble gum melodic synth pop and pretty hard techno. Most of that is shit that can be done on a grid, so once you know what the formula for it is, you can work within that.

I know what my confines are as a musician, and I try to work within that box. Then once I'm really comfortable with the shape of that box, I can start branching out of it, which has happened a lot over the years, to the point that I'm comfortable with what I write and with how I play. I'm even proud of it.

**That's the exact opposite of me. I'm good with tactical instrumentation like guitars, drums, bass, whatever, but I am terrible at using sequencers and hardware. It's like math to me, and my brain just shuts off. I can't do it.**

That's kind of exactly what it is. I've always thought that I was really bad at math, but like with anything, the more you put into it, the better practiced you become, and the better you are. I'll spend 12 hours a day pouring over these stupid sequencers, or sitting in front of these manuals and learning how to work this garbage. I can do that. But man, I can't make my two hands and my brain do the same thing at the same time to fucking play a Misfits song. It's impossible.

I've gotten really into modular synthesis and theory over the past couple of years. Maybe I would have passed math in high school if it was posed to me in a musical context like this. Like, why do I have to know what Euclidean anything is? But I do. That's shit that I'm learning in my late 30s. It's wild. But outside of that, math's fucking stupid. I hate math.

**It's good that you're still trying to learn new things. I think that staying curious and open to new ideas is really important in order to have a life of sustained creativity, which is clearly the kind of life you want to have. It seems like you're always doing something. How do you manage your creative schedule and stay on top of everything?**

I literally schedule work days for myself. When I'm not on tour I have a part-time job doing metal work, but I still have a lot of time to myself. My partner and I get up at the same time in the morning. When she goes to work, I sit down at my desk and start grinding. It's like that saying about how writers write. If you want to write a book, you have to sit in front of your stupid typewriter or whatever, and even if you don't get a sentence out, you still have to do it.

I do that with music. For me it's simple: what the fuck else am I going to do with my life? This is what I want to do. This is the only thing that I've ever felt gave me comfort and purpose. This is the only thing that I've ever felt had any real meaning. I feel privileged to have the life I have, even though I'm still broke and have no real security. I'm sitting outside of a Waffle House in Alabama getting eaten alive by mosquitoes talking about how when I go home, I'm going to sit in front of a bunch of step sequencers and slam my head into a desk. I'm turning 39 in a couple weeks, and I have everything that I wanted when I was 13 years old. And that's sick, you know? It's awesome. That's how I stay on top of it all. I just don't fucking stop.

**That's a very positive way of looking at things.**

I used to think that success was measured on this kind of conventional capitalist scale, like you go to college, you have kids, you invest in the stock market, you have a 401k, and you make a family. That always made me feel insecure because I never wanted any of that. I didn't know how to make myself want it. I wanted this. I've just recently stopped kicking myself in the head for not going to college and thinking that I'm not good enough or smart enough because I don't own a house. And chances are, I'll never own a house. That's ok with me now.

**Measuring yourself against those expectations is definitely something that's been inflicted on us. It's not really something that you get to choose. Most of us were raised and conditioned to believe that we have to consume and acquire things in order to be considered acceptable adults. It's a really hard mindset to get out of,**

**and it's a really dangerous mindset for creative people because it just totally fucks with the soul. Being creative is not supposed to be about making content or selling things or buying houses.**

Music, or any kind of art, is supposed to be personal exorcism. You have these feelings, you don't know how to process the world, you don't know how to communicate, and you just do a primal scream. The truer to yourself that you can be, the better your art is. The only way I think that you fail as an artist is if you are trying to create content, which is not art. If you're just throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what garbage sticks so that people will buy into your image or get you more plays on Spotify and more Instagram followers. If you're doing that, you'll never be happy and you're just perpetuating the sick capitalistic cycle. You're trying to get that 2.5 kids and make your parents proud. There isn't necessarily anything wrong with that, but that's not art to me.

**Are there any other artistic mediums that have a direct influence on your writing and music?**

I got into genre cinema, specifically horror, before I was ever into music. My father showed me *Phantasm* haphazardly when I was four years old and that was it. I've always been afraid. I've always thought that there was something out to get me, that there was something around the corner, and horror movies helped me to articulate and tap into that. Then music came along and spoke to a lot of those fears. Over time, I've come to view the best horror as allegory.

Take the record *Wake In Fright* that we made a few years ago. That's based on this book from the mid-'60s, about this school teacher who thinks that he's better than everyone, and winds up in this outback town and gambles away all of his money and gets stuck in this cycle, disintegrating. That speaks to me in a pretty literal way, but also, I was thinking about how at the time, certain similarities were happening in my life where I had a lot of emotional shit going on. I wasn't sleeping, and when I would sleep, I would wake up a couple of hours later in a state of terror. I was lucky if I was averaging two hours a night. It made me think about all these times in my life where I thought I was hot shit, and I would get myself involved in some gnarly situations that would land me in hot water with my family and friends—would land me in financial hot water, would land me in jail, whatever. And it's all because of my arrogance.

Stuff like that is littered all over horror cinema. I mean, look at George Romero's "Dead" films—you have these shells who are reanimated and their lizard brain takes them to a shopping mall. As silly and over-the-top as that is, when I was a teenager that really spoke to me. It got me thinking about what my role is in the world, if I am a producer or if I'm a consumer. That plays into a lot of the work I've done, that and things having to do with mental illness and addiction. The disintegration of one's psyche and one's spiritual self—that's what I like to speak to. If I was making movies or writing books, I would still be speaking to the same thing, and the thing that I speak to is fear.

**Is there anything you think musicians who are just starting out should know?**

I was on tour with a friend recently and somebody sent me a demo and asked me to listen to it. I was complaining about how annoying that was, that this person I barely knew threw something in my inbox. Then I remembered when I had to do things like that and I felt so bad. I remember having to holler at people I barely knew like, "Hey, would you give this a listen?" Or, "Hey, can I get on the show?" and no one would ever write me back. But I didn't give up and eventually someone gave me a chance, then another person gave me a chance, and so on. It had this snowball effect. Unless you are friends with Billy Corgan or some shit, or you're a popular kid with connections, you're not going to get anywhere right off the bat. No one's trolling Bandcamp looking for shit that they like. People just like what they're told to like, and so you have to do this crazy legwork.

**You have to shamelessly, relentlessly throw yourself in front of people.**

You do, and it sucks. But it also brings you to this turning point where you have to ask yourself—are you doing this because you want people to notice you, or are you doing this for yourself? If you're doing this for yourself, if you're making something for the sake of catharsis so that you can give voice to feelings that are hard to articulate otherwise, then eventually that is likely to resonate with someone somewhere. And if it's a

little bit of both, the attention and the catharsis, that's ok too but you have to suck it up and keep putting yourself out there until someone bites. Try not to beat yourself up when someone doesn't write back.

**Did you ever want to do anything other than music?**

Not really, no. All I've ever wanted to do was play music and write, and those are two things that don't come particularly naturally to me. I played in high school bands that never went anywhere. I got published in a couple student journals or whatever in high school, and that was cute, but it didn't go anywhere. After that, my life disintegrated. I spent a number of years as this drunken, addicted clown that nobody would really take seriously. Eventually, I found people who were willing to take a chance and make music with me after trying to do it on my own forever, or trying to hitch my wagon to other people forever... but I know that I'm never going to feel like I'm good enough. I'm always going to feel like a failure. It's how I'm hardwired.

**Where do you think that comes from?**

I don't know. Nature, nurture, chemistry. When I was a little kid, I thought that I was ugly. I thought that my parents didn't like me. I thought that I was stupid, and no matter what, no matter what presents I got for Christmas, no matter if I got good grades, no matter if somebody said that I did something right, it wasn't enough. After a while, it caused me to give up on a lot of things. I grew up in not the best of all neighborhoods on the outskirts of Philadelphia and I used to get beat up on my way to and from school. I would hang out in this park with these kids who I thought were the cool guys because girls liked them and they seemed to have a lot of friends. These kids would beat the shit out of me. I was heavysset and kids were just cruel. My family life wasn't great. My dad wasn't around. My mom had issues. There were drug and alcohol problems on both sides of my family, and so early on I guess I just became wired to think that I was a failure, or to think that I deserved whatever bad shit was happening. I've never really been able to get that out of my head, even though I've had it pretty good for a long time now. I'm a middle-class white dude. My life doesn't suck. It could be so much worse.

**The things that happen when your brain is still forming and you're a kid stay with you. That's when you're learning how to process the world around you, so if you experience trauma during that time, your psyche develops with and around the effects of that.**

Absolutely. I think that a lot of that plays into alcoholism and drug addiction. I remember getting really drunk for the first time, and for the first time ever, not caring about anything bad that had happened. I felt warm. I felt relief. I chased that feeling for a long time until that feeling started turning on me, and then I got sober.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is that if you know that no matter what you do, you're never going to feel like it's enough, you're never going to feel like there's enough love, you're never going to feel like there's enough praise, you're never going to feel like you're smart enough, attractive enough, whatever, and if you know that that's just something in your head, then that's some shit you can work with. Just because you think the thing you're working on is garbage doesn't mean it actually is.

**If you think that you suck and everything sucks anyway no matter what and you know that, then you may as well just do it anyway because why not?**

Exactly. Are you going to make that a fucking prison, or are you going to let that kind of self-knowledge liberate you? Do you know this is an illusion? Because if you know that this is an illusion, then you can fucking break free of it, and you can break free of it with humility.

**Are we talking about the Matrix right now?**

We kind of are, man. We just got red-pilled. You're free if you acknowledge what the confines are and are willing to get out of it. It can either be your cage or it can be your ladder out of the cage. Just keep going.

**That's a neat little verbal bow you just tied there.**

You gotta tie the trash bag before you throw it out.

Michael Berdan Recommends:

1. Deathdream (Bob Clark/1974)

A year before inventing the slasher movie with *Black Christmas*, Bob Clark helmed this miserable interpretation on "The Monkey's Paw" legend. A proud middle-aged couple get the news that their son has been killed in Vietnam and wish against death for his return. Return he does, but he is not the same. A deeply compelling meditation on loss, mourning and the personal toll of war.

2. The Devil All The Time by Donald Ray Pollock

A tremendous bleak and powerful piece of Americana. The comparisons to Flannery O'Connor & Cormack McCarthy are obvious and well deserved, as this novel fits comfortably along those author's best and darkest work. A dismal portrait of the effects of extreme poverty in post WWII rural America. This book is fucked up.

3. E-Saggila - My World My Way (Northern Electronics)

My favorite contemporary noise & techno producer's best work yet. Every time I think this shit can't get any better she breaks another barrier. This is probably E-Saggalia's most digestible work to date but that doesn't mean it's any less harrowing than previous records. Nasty.

4. Swimming in the ocean

My partner and I recently went to the beach at Asbury Park, NJ to hang with some of her college friends and their kids. While there, the kids convinced me to put my feet in the water. I did and the next thing I knew I had waded completely into the arms of the ocean. First time doing that in years and the experience was nothing short of spiritual. I take great comfort in being made aware of how vast the ocean, the world, and the universe are. It humbles me and instantly melts away my inherent narcissism. I'm just a cell within a vast organism. Being in the ocean helps me remember that.

5. Staying on your meds

So yeah, I've struggled with mental illness and learning disabilities all of my life. About a decade ago I made it a point to seek treatment and keep up with it. Lexapro and Wellbutrin helps me tremendously, so much so that every few years I become convinced that I don't need them anymore. See, I don't like the side effects these medicines have on my body. They slow me down. They make me put on weight and just about entirely kill my sex drive, and that just won't do. To a lesser but still real degree, the stigma around taking pills fucks with my ego. Classically, after I feel better for awhile I'll taper off of the medicine and won't notice much of a change. A few months later I will stop sleeping next to entirely. I'll convince myself that everyone I've ever met is out to get me. I will largely lose the ability to engage with other human beings in a functional manner and entirely lose the ability to focus. I wind up having to choose between the pills or checking myself into a facility that will put me on pills anyway or just straight napalming my life. I've been feeling pretty ok for awhile now and have endeavored to stay on my meds no matter what. My condition isn't my fault but treating it is absolutely my responsibility.

I know a number of artists & musicians (myself included) who have come off of their medicines in order to "improve" their work by adding another element of intensity. For the love of God, if this thought crosses your mind please reconsider before pulling the trigger on it. In my experience, these things rarely end well.

Name

Michael Berdan

Vocation

Musician, Writer

□