On being thoughtful about each decision you make

Musician and composer Owen Pallett on maintaining a punk ethos in the world of chamber music, their foolproof lyric writing method, revisiting old work, and negative inspiration.

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As told to Max Mertens, 2682 words.

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This is your first solo album in six years, but you've been busy in that time with different scores and arranging for other musicians. Did these projects take any creative or financial pressure off you when it came to making this record?

Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't really. Film scores are always kind of a bit of a crapshoot. If you score a film and it becomes a bit of a hit, then you do get residuals off it, so it is a good investment if you pick the right films. I notoriously have a bit of a bad nose for a good script. Back in 2008 or 2007, Gus Van Sant was asking me to possibly score *Milk* prior to studio involvement, and I remember reading the script and thinking it was bullshit. It won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay, and I was like "Oh wow, I don't really have a good nose for that kind of stuff." Most of the production work and arrangement work that I do is a little more labor of love. I work pay-what-you-can with the bulk of my clients, unless somebody is signed to a major label or something like that. Like it or not I grew up really internalizing a lot of Steve Albini's politics, and I wanted to take a similar approach to helping people use the sounds of chamber music when they wanted them on the record.

Your new album, *Island*, is a continuation of the narrative arc that you first introduced on *Heartland*, and you recently had some Final Fantasy albums remastered and put on streaming services. Are you comfortable revisiting your past work?

Yeah. I have good relationships with my old albums. When I listen to them I feel very self-satisfied, which sounds arrogant, but you have to understand that I drift through life in a state of self-doubt most of the time. Going back to *Has A Good Home* was a little challenging, because that's one album that I see the appeal of and I appreciate the work I did on it, but it's not a record that I would feel comfortable handing to somebody and saying "This is what I do." Which is also complicated by the fact that it was my first album, and especially in Toronto, kind of a sleeper hit, people really have a relationship to that album. Revisiting that and getting that remastered, it was good, because I really felt that I liked the album more after we polished it.

Before the pandemic hit, were you starting to put together set lists and thinking about how you could incorporate the older songs with these newer ones?

I've had a desire for most of the last decade to get an ideal live setup that would allow me to do the looped violin shit that I was doing in the 2000s, but also have more flexibility. I tried using computers to loop, I travelled with a rack case for awhile. Over a decade ago I did a tour with a CP70, which is like an electric acoustic piano. It sounded great but it was a headache. Only just in the past couple of years did I really hit

upon something magical I think. There's no computer, it's just a little pedalboard that I figured out a way of setting it up and programming it that just takes all those old songs and makes them amazing, and also gives me flexibility to perform these newer songs. It's a shame that I haven't had a full tour yet, but hopefully if 90 percent of all venues don't shut down—which is what I was reading this morning—I'll be able to do that once we find a vaccine.

Is there any good advice that you've received from artists you've either played with or toured with about how material can be interpreted and reinterpreted?

Not really advice so much as knowledge that I absorbed. Sometimes it was positive and sometimes it was negative. I talk sometimes about something that I don't really have a word for except to call it "negative inspiration"—it sounds like you're dissing someone when you talk about it, but it's actually the opposite. When you see something and it inspires you to do it differently or do the opposite even. I have talked about how I have heard a record and thought "Oh I want to do the opposite of that," and people have thought that I'm trash talking the record where I'm not, I'm engaging with it. Which to me, engaging with something and being critical of it is one of the greatest compliments that you can pay a work of art as far as I'm concerned.

One of the things that I really learned from touring with Arcade Fire is just the kind of synaptic response that certain people have at their shows. When I first started touring with them it was the thrill of the new, and then when we were touring *Reflektor*, there was a nostalgic element to it. The pleasure that people were deriving from hearing the older songs was almost like an act of recreating a previous time in their lives. It's pretty early days to call that band a legacy act—they're not the Beatles or anything—but it made me think about how people relate. It did make me think about the times that I've gone to see, say John Cale perform, and I've sat there while he's played some new songs and I'm thinking about how much I wish he'd play anything off *Paris 1919*. I've always said this— I say this to friends, I say this to clients, whenever anybody starts to pretend to be an artist, I remind them that people who are paying money to see your show or paying money for your record, they're expecting a return on their investment. I don't think that it's reasonable for most acts that are trading on that nostalgia button to go to a show and not hear some kind of throwback moment.

You wrote an essay for the expanded edition of Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* and you've written about music theory for Slate. How have these exercises made you think about how your own work is received critically?

My attitude towards music criticism is always changing and shifting. In the 2000s when Pitchfork seemed to have total sway over the face of independent music, I had consternation towards their decimal point ratings, simply because I worried that it was almost too arbitrary, too archivistic to put priority on creating a canon, creating a ranking, creating a list, as opposed to an actual, emotional, tangible engagement with work.

At the time in the 2000s, you might have read *VICE Magazine*, and *VICE Magazine* also used a numeric rating, and then later did smiles versus barfs. I always found that I preferred *VICE*'s method in terms of who they were engaging in music, because it was much more personal, much more irreverent, and it didn't take itself so seriously. I also have to acknowledge that I think this creation of the canon that Pitchfork was doing is actually kind of reflective of how music listeners are almost forced to engage with music at this point just cause there's so fucking much of it. And so people do go to their Rate Your Music and do look at Metacritic when they want to see what to listen to next, I think it's become almost a necessary filter for people to a degree.

More recently, generally when I read music criticism, historically I have felt a little frustrated with the way that music writers tend to put more weight on the biography of the musician and on the lyrical material, instead of speaking somewhat more critically about the actual building blocks of the music itself. Those Slate pieces that you mentioned, it was kind of a joking response to Ted Gioia, who was saying music critics shouldn't be writing about music unless they know about music itself and decrying Page Six gossip reporting in terms of how work was reviewed. Although I did agree that I would like to see more engagement like that, I also didn't agree that kind of Page Six reporting was itself invaluable. Average music listeners don't know anything about music, why should the music writers have to?

Are you constantly writing? Have you been able to work while in quarantine or have you found that a challenge?

I have not been finding myself blocked as a writer no. I don't believe when people say they write all the time. There are people who make that a practice, the same way I practice violin all the time, but that's not how I write because I'm working on so much different stuff. There's mornings where I'm just "I need to get this arrangement done, I need to get this film score done." When I'm writing lyrics, it's because I've written it into my calendar. I have a method that always works and I think it's really great. What you do is before you go to bed, you open up your web browser, and pick a songwriter whose lyrics you really admire. So let's say that person is Cass McCombs. You go to a website like SongMeanings and open up 80 tabs that are all Cass McCombs songs. Then you turn off your Wi-Fi, close your laptop, and go to sleep. You sleep and set your alarm for one hour earlier than you would normally get up, so you deprive yourself of one hour's worth of sleep, if you sleep seven hours a night, you're going to sleep six. You wake up and you're in this magical period where your alpha waves are still going on, you're still in this half-asleep moment of dreaming. Go to the coffee shop, open your laptop, and you start pre-writing, and you allow the first cup of coffee to collide with those still-floating around alpha waves, and it triggers this immediate creative gobbledly-gook.

I always say you should never try and write with a purpose to start, and if you make this a practice everyday, if you're writing for two hours a day minimum, you're going to produce oceans of material. Then when you get to your point where you feel like you're hitting a wall, go to those Cass McCombs lyrics, and use those as flashcards.

I can even give you an example, the whole "Godkiller's alive" moment happened when I flipped over to a Cass McCombs lyric and it said a "lionkiller got married," it triggered something. You bounce your ideas off these lyrics, you're not plagiarizing, you're allowing them to stimulate the brain. Around the one-hour mark, when you've finished your first cup of coffee, you might find yourself getting tired and that there's no more free-writing coming down the pipeline. It's at that moment you go back and you start editing stuff that you had been writing the previous few days, adding lines, changing the wording of this or that.

Right now there's a lot of conversations happening about accountability and diversity in the music industry, and workplaces in general. From your perspective, what are the changes that you'd like to see emphasized and how do we go about implementing them effectively?

I think the priority is to make sure you're listening to marginalized voices, because more often than not, people are already telling you what the problems are and telling you how to fix them. There are a diversity of problems and a diversity of solutions, anybody with a brain can synthesize an appropriate response. I have had a conversation with an individual recently who was tasked with hiring more Black employees, and she told me it was difficult because there weren't all that many Black applicants into the field of this workplace. It's kind of a chicken-egg situation, you have to work in order to change the fabric of the industry itself, you know what I'm saying?

Ultimately you just have to hire more Black people, hire more Indigenous people, that's basically what I try to put into practice. I try to work on it in a day-to-day sense when I curate. I've curated a bunch of festivals over the past few years, and really aimed to try and include a diverse group of performers. I'm not trying to toot my own horn, this is the work you can do when you're in a position where you are picking a band to support you, when you're in a position to hire that employee, when you're curating that festival. I remember at a certain point I think Sufjan Stevens had put out *Carrie & Lowell*—I don't remember if I was speaking to him or speaking to his manager—but I was like "I want to support you" and he just said "Nope. Don't take white guys on as support." Okay, fair enough. What I've been learning more and more over a period of time is it's important to be humble and be prepared to step back and be wrong or defer to people that are in positions knowing more.

When was the last time you were emotionally moved by a song or piece of music?

Let me take a moment because I do have moments where I hear music and it does extremely move me. During the quarantine I worked on an album with Sean Nicholas Savage, and there are songs on that record that really deeply move me, I could just not believe how incredible his songwriting is. Aside from that, it's hard because all I can really name are collaborators and people I'm working with, because I'm working in music so much I don't tend to

listen to music for pleasure outside of that. Christine and the Queens, that EP with "People, I've Been Sad," it's been melting my face off all year.

Owen Pallett Recommends:

1. First thing is dried romano beans. They're also called cranberry beans. I've just got really, really into dried beans, when you're at home all the time, you can soak them and it has become an absolute staple of my daily food. I've done a lot with a lot of different kind of beans over the years, but I really started to adore specifically romano beans.

2. Second is candles. Not scented candles, but functional white candles. Really, really great, even when you're at home by yourself, just really can centre your brain and create a nice mood. I'm often thought of candle light as something you do when there's guests coming over, I've started doing it for me.

3. There's a book by Kai Cheng Thom I want to shout out, it's called *I Hope We Chose Love*. She's a women who writes about her experiences in activist communities, trans communities and stuff like that. She writes about compassion, writes about understanding in a way that's very, very healing and hopeful.

4. I want to shout out Charles Ives' "Piano Sonata No. 2 (Concord)." This piece of music has a role in 20th century classical music kind of akin to *Moby Dick* in American literature in that it's something you can fall into and become obsessed with. I've been listening to it for years and just really now started to read the book of essays about it, look at the score, unpack all the little quotations and references. It's a giant musical cryptical crossword and thrilling to listen to.

5. The microphone that I love is the Shure SM7. It's a pretty standard mic for both broadcast recording and for singing — it's about $400. I've tried lots of other microphones on my voice, and there are some I like better, but the SM7 is my go-to workhorse vocal mic.

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