On how everything you make hel you progress

Musician, producer, and label owner Joakim discusses existing outside genre, not being afraid to make "modest" art, and why even the feedback you reject is useful.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2158 words.

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You run your own labels. There's freedom there, and independence. Why was it important for you early on to create your own path with your music?

Since I was really young, I have been obsessed with this idea of freedom, of being able to decide for myself what I want to do, when I want to do it. Which led me to do weird things, because I went to business school. The idea was, "I don't know what I want to do in life, but I want to be my own boss, so I need to make a lot of money very fast." That was my way of thinking. Of course, I didn't do business after, but it was always there. When I came to make music or create a label, it was always an important thing to not have any boundaries. And it's also a way to avoid definitions. Maybe it has to do with identity, too.

Have you found the foundation you developed in business school has helped you navigate the music industry?

No, not at all. It's funny because right now I'm working on a project that is more like a business. It's not in music. I realized that I really created this separation in my brain. When it comes to music, I just can't have this business-orientated thinking. It's impossible. I don't know why.

I've listened to a lot of your music over the years. Part of a reviewer's job is to come up with genre definitions, or to frame something, and it's hard to frame what you're doing.

It's a blessing because it means I can always renew myself, and I'm never stuck in anything. I've met a lot of different people, work in a lot of different environments with other disciplines and have a very horizontal, transversal approach. On the other hand, being commercially successful while doing that is basically impossible. It's how you balance your freedom with your need to make money, or to be successful, or to please your ego.

When you have an idea, how do you know what form it's going to take? How do you go about turning an idea or an inspiration into a specific sound?

I think it's a bit like a two-mode approach. First, I have this tendency to think a lot about what I'm going to do next, and trying to create a framework. It can be like I'm reading specific books, and then it gives me ideas about the concept, then I'm starting to think how this concept can be translated into music. If it's this type of music, then what kind of instrument should I use? So there's this part, each time trying to think of new angles and new ways of doing, but attached to something real, like an inspiration. Then there's the improvisation part, which is also important, but it comes after, while I'm doing the thing.

You're a big proponent of live music. What's it been like without crowds, for the last year and half during COVID? Does that change the way you make music?

When I'm making club music, it has a function. It has a setting. I know how things work a little more. You anticipate and work based on how people react. But this is not the case for all my music, which is also a reason why it goes in a lot of directions.

The new album, *Second Nature*, has a connection to the pandemic because it's about about our relationship to nature. And obviously what's happening has a connection with that. So the current situation did help me in that sense. It's not personal in terms of what it's saying, but it's personal in terms of how I made it, and how I'm going back to some early influences.

I also created the new record with the idea of an installation, that it would exist in a space, with videos and something a bit more conceptual. It's hard to deal with the idea when you can't make it concrete; you work so much on something that is only in the air. It's such a different experience to feel the music in a physical space.

You're saying, you went back to remembering why you made music early on, that initial joy. Do you ever find yourself getting burnt out by the industry side things? It can cloud the music itself.

No, surprisingly that never happened. Even though I have a label, which is not supposed to be good for your creativity. But I feel like I'm lucky that I really enjoy the process. I think it's a very important thing, and that defines two categories of artists. There's the artists that suffer from the process, but eventually makes great art. Then there's the artist who enjoys the process, and the result is not even that important. I'm more like that.

People listen to music differently now than when you first started. Has that changed the way you make music? Do you ever think in terms of people popping through playlists? Or do you still focus on the album as an album?

I try not to think too much about it. This new record is very long. I had a lot of strong songs. When I played the tracks to some friends, one of them said, "It's really long, and I can feel two kind of directions, so you should do two records." But I thought, "That doesn't fit with my concept of the record and how I want to present it."

So, with streaming in mind, I then thought, "Who cares about the format?" "Who cares about how long it is?" I think it's freeing. Because this idea of the length of an album, it comes from formats. It's always been tied to technology. Now it's basically limitless, and you don't really know how people listen to music. I try to not think about it and just do it like I think it should be, and how long it should be. And that's it.

A few years ago, after Kanye West released *The Life of Pablo*, he kept adding songs to it after it was out. I always think about that in terms of breaking formats

Yeah. There was also a lot of projects or platform that had this idea of making music adaptable. I remember this startup where they would ask musicians to give the stems from songs they made. And they would create all these different types of remixes for the morning, for the night. And I thought, "This will never work." Because what artists want their music to be just modified depending on the weather? But in the case of Kanye, it's different because he's doing it. So that's where it's interesting, because it's this kind of incremental work.

But, with streaming, the artists are not happy. They're not making money. I mean, Spotify is still losing millions every year. They're not making a profit. I don't even know how it's possible. Then the platforms that are more music-friendly, like Bandcamp, it's cool, but you can't make really a living. Or some do, but it's very small. It's a great platform, but it's not the solution.

Do you ever get burnt out on your own work?

It depends on the project. With this project, there was a bit of that. I'm a huge control freak, so I can't just give it to someone for mixing. It's impossible. But this project, because it was quite ambitious and I had a lot of material, I played it to two or three good friends that I trust. They gave me feedback, which I didn't follow at all. But it's always good to have feedback, even if you don't follow it. It's still in the back of your head and it influences you. Also, because I come from electronic music, mixing, for instance, and writing, producing, is the same thing. I mean, to me, it's one thing. It's different when you're a songwriter with a guitar, and then give it to maybe someone else to produce it.

Was that part of the appeal of electronic music, because you could really just control so much of it?

Yeah. That makes total sense, especially the way I discovered electronic music and how you make it. I come from classical music, when I was studying in that business school, I was practicing my piano, going every day to a room with a piano. But then this guy gave me a synth, and said, "I know you're playing piano so here's a synth, I don't use it." And I just played a little bit and I realized that I can record all these different instruments in one sequencer. Like, I can be the orchestra myself. It completely blew my mind.

And you were saying, with the new music, how you felt like you returned to some of the earlier approaches you had, or the feeling you had when you were first starting to make music. Was that part of it, too, rediscovering these instruments?

I tend to think classical music brings very specific emotions that I never found in any other type of music. I don't know if it's just me or it's something other people experience, but it's really very clear for me. It's like comparing almost two different disciplines. Like comics and novels. I had this teacher who had a very interesting way of telling me how to interpret the music. Because when you do classical music, you read music and you interpret music that hundreds of thousands of people have interpreted before. But he said, "Try to read through the music, through analyzing the changes of chords, of keys, and every detail. What is the story? What does it tell?" You make the story in your head, and that's how you're going to be able to interpret the music. It's not just like playing and following the instructions.

I think that's something that was really helpful in creating music later, because I tend to construct it like a story, very often. I mean, I was frustrated when I started that every time I would have a review it would be like, "cinematic music," or something like that. But at the same time I understand that. There's something constructed a bit like that.

There are voices and vocals in your work, which brings a level of analog humanness to it.

Yeah, it started pretty early. On the first record I made, there was two tracks with vocals. Very transformed vocals. It's also from music I liked back then—like I was obsessed with Charivari and all this kind of music from Detroit, and electro. And I like weird lyrics. When there's always like a double meaning. I'm completely obsessed with the idea of the song, the perfect song. Like something that just crosses any cultural barrier, and you just hear it and you're taken by it.

Have you written the perfect song yet? Or you're still trying to do it?

No. I gave up. Actually, this new record is really not song-based. I tend to sometimes think, "Okay, I'm going to try to make the best songs I can." But then it's, ah, it's hopeless. I'm never going to be The Beatles, or Johnny Cash. So I go back to making more abstract stuff.

There's this idea, you know, when you're young, where you think, "I'm going to write the great American novel," or "I'm going to write the great French-language novel." And there's a point where you realize, "Ok, maybe I'm not going to do that," but you keep going. What is it that keeps you going? Why do you keep making stuff?

It's the process. I just can't not make music. And also…What you say is interesting, because I've been thinking about that. This idea of doing modest art Everybody is brought up with the idea that you need to make great art.

But most of the things that I listen to and I really love is very modest art. Like, even if you think of library music, it’s not made to be art. It’s made to be used for commercials. But there’s so much love in the craft that it becomes amazing. And it’s very modest. I think this struggle is a good thing to go back to, and retreat from. It makes you progress. Even if you’re not going to make the greatest record or write the greatest novel, the process of doing it helps you progress.

Joakim Recommends:

Philippe Descola - *Beyond Nature & Culture* (book)

Emanuele Coccia - *The Life Of Plants* (book)

Bernie Krause interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist

Chris Watson on Apple Music or Spotify

Melvin Sheldrake - *The Entangled Life* (book)

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