

On hobbies, habits, and creative work



Musician Stephen Malkmus on the value of chill music in crazy times, the pleasures of falling into old man mode, and understanding the ways your creative process evolves over time

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2659 words.

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Has the experience of doing press stuff, or more specifically, being asked to talk about your creative work, become less weird over time?

You know, I think it's fun to talk to people. I appreciate when people like me and that they have taken the time to interview me or they're interested in what I do. Maybe I didn't take it seriously back in the day, but I think I don't mind it now because I spend a lot of time just with my family or looking at my phone. These days, doing interviews is like going out or something, it feels like socializing. It's also interesting figuring out how to talk about something, and understand the right thing to project. That's probably just like being a politician, there's probably a little game to it. I don't know. Mostly now I just think, "OK, I like this person and we're going to get along fine."

You are in the middle of a wild creative streak, it seems. You're about to release what is ostensibly a folk album less than a year after releasing your own version of an electronic record. Somehow this folk record feels like a kind of balm in response to how intense the rest of the world feels right now...

I think people relate to that right now, that overall vibe of chill. I mean it's like a different place, a different use, a different utility of music, you know? It feels very useful to have some music that helps you not feel stressed. You could probably look at streaming data for different versions of calm, chill things—curated Spotify lists, things that are instrumental—that people are seeking out. It's not like I'm intentionally trying to mine this, I'm just saying. I'm the kind of person who looks at those things and wonders, "Why is this getting a lot of attention? Why would a person want to hear this right now?" You see this music that is not really epic in a rock-and-roll kind of way, you don't even have lyrics, and then you look and see that it's hugely streamed and loved, you know? It's because people are looking for that right now. It's interesting.

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When you are making a record like *Traditional Techniques*, which has such a specific aesthetic, how do you communicate that to the people you bring in to play with you? Did you have certain cultural touchstones for this current folky moment you are exploring?

I was thinking about Gordon Lightfoot and [Bert Jansch](#) and things like the lone '70s dude. We told the bass player, who was a jazz guy, to think about an [Astral Weeks](#) sort of thing. Not that I would ever try to reach the heights of a record like that, and *Astral Weeks* is not on my desert island list. I think it's amazing, but it's not like a desert island disk for me. I still love it. But anyway, that was more like a touchstone I could tell

those guys. Some players, you don't really need to tell them anything 'cause they have heard almost everything. Some people don't want you to even tell them any touchstones and others do. Like, if they're just coming from a different idiom or have a different shared knowledge. And as for me, I'll describe it like—I have a porchy dad feel for one song, and then I'm doing Christian rock on this one. For my voice, maybe I'll try to sound like Neil Diamond for a second and then I'll sound like Bert Jansch or try and channel Velvet Underground's third album for a minute.

So it's inevitable that you do these things when you make a record, or at least I do. I try to embody certain things, even if I'm the only one who would even realize it. I love The Stones. You know when there are slide guitars and stuff, I can't help it. Of all the boomer bands, they're my favorite of all time. So there could be a George Harrison moment on certain things. We do a mess of those '60s-era counterculture people, but knowingly and not necessarily reverentially because they can be poked fun at. Sometimes for some of the excess. It's funny to be referencing so much of this stuff at this particular time in my life. I really appreciate all the genuine feeling a lot of that music has, and I appreciate the newness of what they were doing at that time. It's inspiring, still. Even if we're mad at them for being wealthy now and stuff, they still made some really good songs.

Do you find the process of making music—or how you think about making songs, what that experience is like for you—has changed radically over the years?

Yeah. I think it probably has. I mean the first steps, when you are just starting out, it's like ...you're just *all in*. Just jumping in. And giddy and maybe a little unsure. You don't know what you're doing at all, for sure. And while you still get a jolt out of making new things, it changes over time. I still get a real feeling from hearing things come out of the speakers back at you, when it really exists. Still, it's got to be different than it was back then. I mean, I think I'm probably still chasing the same... I don't know, achievement? Some kind of capitalist goal is embedded there.

That said, making something, and being useful, is important. I think the satisfaction from those things is always, always there. At least the way I was brought up, it's like you want to make a difference in some way beyond just selling something. There's plenty of ego in it, but you just want to do something with your life. I'm very pro no-work and just being happy. I would like to have a world where we don't work. But if you're going to work, then try and do something that is cool. I guess I'm still a tad stuck in that cycle. So music is how I managed to do it, to exist in the world, where I feel like I'm occupied with doing something really special, you know? Or at least something relatively special.

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You have a very distinct style as a lyricist. Has that part of the process changed at all for you? Do the music and the words usually evolve as two separate things?

I mean, there's so many different ways to approach lyrics. Whether it's a rapper, or someone like my friend David Berman or something... there are so many people I'm in awe of and I can't do what they do. I don't think my own lyrics are bad or anything, but I only know how to do it the way it works for me. You try to find for yourself a way of writing that goes with your music, but it's music first. You know? Then I ask myself something like, "*What kind of dude am I?*" And then you combine that with what you are with everything you like and the culture that you've created and you measure it against all the standards of greatness.

So simple, really. [laughs]

I mean, you just think about things that are, if not great, then things we all admire as being good. Something to measure against. I've never made a movie, but if I were a director then maybe I'd be thinking of, say, Ingmar Bergman, and thinking of him while I'm shooting or something. Movie directors have to deal with a lot more moving parts and are probably going to be more rational and more planned out than someone making a record, but you know what I mean.

I appreciate the freedom that comes with making music. I like stuff that's kind of conjured out of thin air or has that atmosphere or feeling about it. There's an aspect of that I can work well with-with everything *not* in control. I like that. I try and make a virtue of that, maybe to the detriment of tighter lyrics or ever having everything be just Type A perfect.

I could be totally wrong, but I've always had the sense that you were someone who always basically did whatever you wanted to, and went wherever the creative stream led you to.

I think I just stuck with the same Gen-X mindset of doing things. It's more of a personal thing, a more personal choice. Like, just in terms of making all these different kinds of records, that's actually more of like... I'm not going to say it's a mid-life crisis, it's not, but it does have something to do with taking stock of what you've already done and then just trying new stuff. In my case, I don't think it really has anything to do with the music industry. It's more personal. Like, I've done the same thing a few times with the same people, so maybe now I should do something else. I was not thinking of things in, say, some of the buzzwords people use today. I was not thinking about how I should do something more "risk-averse" and make a record with loose, folky guitars or something.

Will you play shows on the back of this record? Do you like playing shows at this point?

Yeah, we're doing some. We're going to rehearse and stuff, figure out a nice hour and 20 minutes. So the people that played on this new record, I think it'll be fun to play with them. I think people will like it and I'll enjoy just being able to play in a different way. You know, giving people some folky, boomer-ish things to enjoy. All the pieces are coming together for it to be a positive experience. But you know, we've still got to go out and do it and travel. That's something that you kind of forget when you've been creatively loafing in your house for a long time. Then it's like, "Oh, this is what labor is like again." I gotta go carry some shit around.

When you are home and in "creative loafing" mode, do you have a fairly habitual creative practice?

I'm waiting for it to hit more. [laughs] Otherwise I'm in "family mode" and "old guy exercise" mode. You know, I play tennis or do yoga or I try to do some of that self-care outside of just sitting around, because you have to and it feels good to exercise. So I do a lot of these almost retiree type things mixed with waiting for that creative spark to hit and fucking answering emails. Keeping up on politics takes like an hour and a half a day—just zoning on your phone—for me to feel like I sort of know what's going on. And I like that, too, these days. That's leisure to me. And I think maybe knowing what's actually going on in the world is part of being a good artist, too. So yeah, that's what I do. But the music and playing on guitars or pianos and all that... I'm waiting for that, like what to do next, and it's a little bit frightening when nothing's coming. I don't know.

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I know so many people for whom music is their escape pod from reality. I remember Kim Deal saying she thinks of making music as, like, her dad going out to the garage to work on a car. You just go out to the garage and fuck around, see what happens...

Steve Albini style.

And then some people are like, "I get up every day at nine. I have coffee. I go into my studio. I do something for an hour so I feel like I've done something. Maybe something happens, maybe something doesn't."

Yeah, I don't do that. It's more like I just know when it starts to feel good to play again. Right now I'm at a point where maybe nothing's coming that feels special lately. Of course someone like Kim or me, we probably have stuff laying around we can work on. She probably has like 40 old songs she can re-revisit, you know? Or The Rolling Stones with *Tattoo You*, just like old stuff that you can pump up. You can go revisit all of these little half ideas you have saved until something better pops up. To someone like me, it's not like it's going to be irrelevant because it's older material, because it's sort of already irrelevant to the mainstream pop narrative

or whatever. [laughs]

This will foreseeably be a very busy year for you because you have this record to promote and then...

Yep, we've got tours. And then two Pavement shows in Spain and Portugal.

You've made a lot of different kinds of records with different kinds of people outside of the Pavement world at this point, and yet... people are never going to stop asking you about Pavement. Obviously, there are worse problems to have than having been in a band that people continue to love, but I always wonder if that is something that you just have to make peace with—"Love your new solo record, but... what about Pavement?"

You have to. You make peace with it because it's an end road to a livelihood that I would choose over any others. And there was a lot of labor involved by me and the other ones that benefit from it, and you don't want to just piss that away. It's good to have made something that people love. And you know it's inevitable that perhaps certain people are always gonna love that music more than other music I've made, and I get it. The music you come to love at a certain age, that is like your pocket zone where the music enters your DNA and it's going to be there forever. So I understand that it might be hard to get whatever it is, endorphins or serotonin or whatever it is, to muster for this other music. Once you've already blown it on the earlier stuff, you can still be a fan and appreciate the new stuff—you can still be pretty psyched—but it's maybe never gonna excite you the same way as a fan. It's fine.

Stephen Malkmus Recommends:

I've been reading some Swedish noir fiction, like this woman Kerstin Ekman. It's a relatively literary version of that stuff. I forget the names of all her books, but you can just look them up. She's a cool lady.

The telly. I can't say that I need to recommend that, everyone knows what to do there. It's all mapped out for you. Still, I watch.

I'm very happy for Kelly Reichardt's movie First Cow. I really liked it. She's a friend, so I'm vouching for her and propping the amount of labor they put in on that. It's a Portland movie.

I'm playing tennis a lot. I really had a lot of fun watching these most recent tennis tournaments. Because that was on ESPN2 and I didn't have to work, I got completely consumed. I can't say it's healthy and it's a bit repetitive—and it's hard to give people *that* much credit when all they do is hit tennis balls six hours a day for 40 years—but you still learn some things about fortitude by watching tennis. And tennis fans are pretty cute. They have some podcasts that are seriously, seriously funny and geeky and niche which I really enjoy.

Name

Stephen Malkmus

Vocation

Musician

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