

On not sabotaging your creativity



Musician Steve Von Till on being mindful of what you create, honoring process, what he learned from punk, and why even after years of experience making things remains terrifying.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3147 words.

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How would you describe your artistic philosophy?

To honor the spirit of creativity, which feels like a gift in many ways. If it is not treated with respect, it cannot produce the results that you would want. I believe that art and music in general can be mindful acts of self-transformation, and that by exposing that part of yourself and sharing it with others you are allowing others to have transformative emotional and spiritual experiences. Over the years it's been a process of learning to surrender to the creative force and to accept responsibility for putting it out into the world and not sabotaging yourself with self doubts and things that are contrary to that creative spirit, to that universal force that is creativity. And I'm constantly working on that.

What was your initial impulse when you started playing guitar and writing songs?

I have a real hard time getting back to that initial mindset. We aren't the same person we were back then. It's hard to remember what you were thinking—and who wants to remember what a teenager was thinking?

I think for a lot of teenagers who pick up guitars, the impulse is no more sophisticated than, "I just want to rock."

[Laughs] Yeah. I wanted to rock so I picked up a guitar. I wanted to make loud noise. I wasn't disciplined, though. Other people would be a better model for the discipline of studying the craft of playing guitar or becoming a proficient musician. In my early years, I just needed to play. I found guys in high school to just play with. And we just jammed in the garage playing whatever somebody was playing and then, thank god, right about that same time, punk rock came into my life. I saw that I did not have to be a virtuoso. I did not have to be the next guitar hero; I just had to want to crank it up with my friends and make a racket. And that our noise was as valid as anyone else's noise.

That's a revelatory moment, isn't it?

For sure. And I hope this doesn't sound like I'm looking back on the "good old days," but I wish I could hand an experience like that to my own children—where you can grow up in an inspired scene of people, just being creative with no rules of the greater world or the marketplace. We just printed up records ourselves or dubbed cassette demos ourselves. Or we just booked a gig in our friend's basement. Or that whole thing of, "We're all in this together because we've got an alternative expression that we feel is more vital and more true to the needs of our

people than what the marketplace is deciding for us.”

Would it be fair to say that punk helped you progress from “I want to rock” to “I have something to say” or “I have something to accomplish”?

Yeah, but it’s such a constantly and slowly evolving process that there’s no specific moment. It’s been literally one thing leads to the next thing, day-by-day, week-by-week, year-by-year, decade by decade. And all these things just slowly reveal themselves. And I think there’s a certain amount of change that happens in human personalities between—at least for me—the ages of 17 and 23. So much life happened in that period. I went from barely being able to play a guitar and hacking out some two-bit homemade thrash stuff to the place where Neurosis was on Enemy of the Sun. That’s a lot of life, a lot of growth. My intellect changed quite a bit if I think about the things that were important to me. All of a sudden I was interested in poetry and philosophy and spirituality and all these different worlds. It was following that one impulse to the next impulse, so that period was probably most key in pointing me in the direction that I would follow for the rest of my life. But it’s still evolving to this day.

You mentioned how not sabotaging yourself is an important part of the process. Did you have an experience where you got in your own way with self-doubt and learned a lesson as a result?

I think that’s been a constant. And maybe that’s part of the drive of artists, like, “No, this isn’t good enough. Who the hell am I to think I can do this?” or “I’ve got no business being up there with these guys.” Or whatever it is. When I was younger, I was a super shy kid. If you told me I would ever be in a situation where I’m talking in front of people or standing in front of people, I would die inside a little bit. Just anything but that, you know? I don’t want your attention on me.

So I was terrified when I first started doing this. But I felt driven enough to confront that inner voice of terror and knock on a door and ask somebody if they were interested in working with me or helping me out. Whether it’s, “Hey, will you sell copies of my fanzine? Hey, will you sell copies of my tape?” Or, “Hey, would you be interested in booking my band?” All the way to this day, like, “Am I going to stand in front of all these people with an acoustic guitar and have to make music?” Where one little screw up and... it’s right there, naked for all to behold.

It’s still completely terrifying. I still have micro-moments where I definitely get in my own way, but in general I’ve learned to just go ahead and put it out there—to take responsibility for it. That’s part of the sacred purpose of art: You’re given this glimpse into the creative process, so you have a duty to share it. Unfortunately, that validates everybody’s everything they do. And when you’re also a skeptic that thinks 99.9% of stuff out there is shit that shouldn’t be shared, it becomes a contradiction.

Tell me about the first time you were onstage.

The very first time was with some older kids in high school. I was probably a freshman. I didn’t even really play yet, but this other kid wanted to start a rock band and he was a really good guitar player and put together some classic rock set of some sort, and asked me to be his rhythm guitarist. It was just a high school talent show, but it was lights and sound and people watching and I think I stood absolutely frozen still—probably wearing some ridiculous clothes to try to look cool. [Laughs] And I remember not feeling like I did well, but I was instantly thinking ahead to the next time.

It’s like riding a rollercoaster, right? “That scared the hell out of me, but let’s go again.”

Exactly.

Fast-forward to the early 2000s. You’ve been playing with Neurosis for over a decade and you decide to start putting out acoustic records and performing solo. Was it like starting over?

Yeah. You don't have four brothers to lean on; you don't have a wall of noise to hide behind. With a band like ours, the whole is so much greater than the sum of the parts. It has a life of its own—it's almost like its own entity, and we're just mediums or servants of the entity. But with the solo stuff, you've got to own it. And I still find it absolutely terrifying. Because they're mostly slow, somber songs, there's a lot of space—which means a lot of space for mistakes. So you have to be okay with imperfection and know that that's just part of what the project has to offer: Being humble in the face of imperfection. And being exposed and showing a more intimate side of yourself.

It's a different beast. I have to remind myself to breathe. Sometimes I'll even write it on my lyric sheets because I get so nervous, I forget the words that I wrote. So I have them in front of me, just as a safety net. And I'll sometimes just write, especially on the first song: "Breathe." Slow down and channel it. And then if things go well, you can lose yourself in the music, which is the ultimate goal—to no longer be conscious that you are sitting there as a performer. Because I don't feel like a natural performer. I feel like a natural creative person. Not a performer.

With Neurosis, you've talked about giving yourself over to the music or the performance when you're playing. I know you can't speak for the other members, but why do you think that's become such an important part of the band?

It's the only thing I know how to do, to be honest. We've been doing this our entire adult lives and everything that I've done since the development of that is informed by it. So it's the only creative process I know. Anytime I've tried more cerebral approaches to conceptualizing something first and taking the steps necessary to actualize, it's a throwaway. Some people, that's their gift—and I would absolutely honor and respect that. But that is not my gift. I have learned in all these contexts that the creative force is a mystery. I don't know where it comes from. I've spent a lot of my life thinking in terms of logic and reasoning and scientific theory of existence. But music is one of those guarantees to me that there's stuff we can't explain yet about human consciousness and our connection to things beyond, things outside of ourselves.

Where does poetry come from? Where does music come from? Where does this fascination with sound and manipulation of sound for an emotional effect come from? I think it's one of the higher callings of our species. We've evolved to do these things that are music, art, architecture, science—these things that are so far beyond what most of our society prioritizes for us, that going back to that sense of honoring the process of surrender—that you learn to go with the flow. I've learned to follow that creative stream, that river, and go with the current instead of working against it.

Because when you work against it, it's one step forward and two steps back. But when you go with it—when your focus, attention, creative process and your actions are in line with what you're supposed to be doing on, for lack of a better word, cosmic level—then everything is in line. It just feels right. And over time, I get further along that path of understanding that. The more powerful stuff comes not when I try the least, but when I try to force it the least. But you still have to try; you still have to put in the work. You have to dedicate the time and you have to learn how to focus. But really, it is surrendering to that flow. I don't know how else to say it.

I know that when you're writing and creating with Neurosis, the end result has to be something that everybody in the band agrees upon. Obviously that's not the case with your solo stuff. How do you see the difference between the two processes?

Working with other human beings is inherently just more rewarding because more brains are smarter. And since we all have a similar view in that it has to be something greater than ourselves and you've got to take your ego out of it, you don't worry about what anybody else thinks. You're not doing it for any other purpose or industry or audience. It's for that greater purpose of the art, which with Neurosis is creating an all-encompassing, spiritual, emotional journey through heavy rock music.

And even though we have traditional rock and roll instruments, it's about finding ways to make them conjure up other ideas. The group process allows different people at different times to speak loudest for the spirit. If someone feels very strongly about something, they will step in and go, "No way. That's not going to fly." And so

luckily, everybody jumps in on those things and what we end up with is allowing those moments of tension and push and pull to ultimately benefit a stronger end result.

But writing solo material is different because you only have to make yourself happy.

Yeah, which doesn't make it any easier—and in fact, maybe sometimes more difficult. Because, I mean, sure, you can streamline the process—and there's less cooks in the kitchen, so to speak—but you also don't have any voices of validation. Instead of, "Oh, that's a great riff. Let's start working on that," it's like, "Oh, this might just totally suck." And "Maybe I should ditch this whole idea. This isn't working." So yeah, it's a different push and pull there.

Your previous solo records have been very much guitar-based records. But on your latest solo record, *No Wilderness Deep Enough*, there's not a guitar to be found. How did that change your approach?

I think part of what made this new record for me another step along that learning and discovery process is that the entire process was largely accidental. I did not begin it knowing I was making an album. I was just following an interesting sound on an instrument that's not as familiar to me—piano. But I'm not even particularly adept as a guitar player, I don't think. I'm just more comfortable with the feel of the instrument. I have a better relationship with it, but I'm self-taught and living in a very unique sphere. I don't have any traditional chops.

So having something like a piano as my only instrument in a moment of inspired sleeplessness—in one of those creative states where I did not realize that what I was coming up with was going to be a future record—I just found these simple chord progressions that were somehow harmonically complex and suggested other melodies. It's the equivalent of three chords as an AC/DC song. But for some reason the piano had all these other resonances that were suggesting other things that led to some Mellotron, and that led to some writing parts for French horn, and then I brought the whole thing into my home studio, started adding synthesizers and processing in my analog electronics. And before I knew it, I had hammered out what to me was an ambient record.

But it didn't have a particular home in the way I saw my artistic output. I saw myself as having this psychedelic post-punk band, my singer-songwriter, acoustic-guitar Americana thing and then my fuzzed out lo-fi home recorded psychedelia project. And this was some ambient-meets-neoclassical with psychedelic treatments thing. But luckily, my good friend Randall Dunn—an engineer I work with and producer who worked with me on my last record—had other ideas. When I approached him and said, "Hey, I'd like to replace the digital piano with real piano, maybe get some real strings on here and real French horn to complement all the electronic sources I've composed here," he said, "That's a great idea, but you should also sing on it and make it your next solo record."

I actually thought that was the wrong way to go, but I took it as a challenge. I thought, "Well, if he believes in it,"—and I really trust his opinions on things—"then I'm going to at least explore it." And within a week after that conversation, I had done the work. I woke up every morning with a notebook and a pen and my coffee and improvised vocals to those tracks. And by the end of the week, I had it nailed down. I called him up, told him he was right, and said, "Let's book some studio time." And that again felt like a different way of surrendering to the natural process, the natural flow, going with the stream instead of fighting against it. Getting out of my own way, not self-sabotaging. Really just letting it happen. And now, in hindsight, that's clearly the way it was meant to happen.

You've also got your first book of poetry coming out, which started as a challenge you presented to yourself as well. What about that challenge appealed to you?

I think it was an act of self-validation. I've been writing poetry my entire adult life—probably not very well, but I've got journals and journals and journals of it. And most of it just lived and died in those journals except for when I was writing lyrics and I would grab phrases or words or lines from them where I need a certain cadence or a certain rhythm or even a certain vowel sound to hang on. Because lyrics have to serve the song—they have to fit in with the music as if they're another instrument. But poetry has to claim the page and it has to live there without any external context, without any mood music. It has to frame its own meaning.

So basically, the challenge was to write pieces that I'm not going to later butcher; that I'm not going to treat as lyric fodder. I did not know it would be a book. I thought at best, when I got a bunch of them, maybe I would submit them somewhere or go to Kinko's and photocopy them into cheap chapbooks to give to friends or put up on the website or whatever. But as I rose to my own challenge, I realized I had these 23 untitled poems that seemed to all fit as one body of work—not to mention, 23 is a good prime number. So I did some refining and edited them and fixed them up to where I thought that they were worthwhile of putting out in the universe.

And that hereby opens up a new pathway of expression for me. In this active now, I also write poetry and I accept it and I own it and I honor it and I'm putting it out there on a limb. Whether anybody else thinks it's any good or not is not in my control. But I did steal two lines out of one of the poems for a song for the new album. I had to. They needed to be there.

Essential Steve Von Till:

1. Neurosis - *Times Of Grace*
2. Steve Von Till - *No Wilderness Deep Enough*
3. Neurosis - *Through Silver In Blood*
4. Steve Von Till - *If I Should Fall To The Field*
5. Harvestman - *In A Dark Tongue*

Name

Steve Von Till

Vocation

Musician, poet

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Bobby Cochran