

On finding the approach that works for you



Musician Tim Kinsella discusses creating experimental systems, humor and ingenuity, and working a shitty job to own your free time.

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As told to Blake Butler, 2522 words.

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I find it so funny to look back on the way that your career with Joan of Arc began. Almost from day one you got marked as a bad boy, especially by people who didn't understand the scene you came out of.

I've never been motivated to make things hoping that people will like them. In fact, I've always thought, "I hope it's music for everybody. I hope everybody can like it."

It's always funny to me that we've been called pretentious because we don't just attach ourselves to a recognizable scene or culture. Honestly, that feels pretentious to me.

So, it started very instinctively just to express what was true to us. And what feels true to me is in between things. The in-betweenness gives a charge of life. If people are disoriented a little, that shocks them awake a little bit, and then you can hopefully expand that awareness or sensibility just in the way that you look around at the world because it's a weird world.

I think maybe it's a bit of fear of the unknown? I wonder in what way the unknown makes itself known to you.

So much of the aesthetic decisions I've made across disciplines has been just dictated by material limitations. Obviously, there's exceptions to that, but more often than not, we just find what will be an interesting way to work. I see people sit down and play guitar and sing a song, and I could never do that. What I do is create systems, like elaborate mousetraps, that then things get squeezed through, and then in the end, something emerges that has the shape of the song.

So, it's less like so and so comes in with a riff and then you add on top of that. Instead, it's like collage.

Yeah. For example, one record was like, we're going to do these hour-long jams with pull a number out of a hat for a BPM [beats per minute]. We have our gear all wired up, and we can't stop for an hour. Even more simply, I'm making some songs right now where I'm playing a couple of drum machines synced to each other through my pedal board, and my friend is singing, and we'll say let's do 10 versions of these and take the best two of them and then develop them into something.

What inspired you to have the will to be conceptual so young?

I was bullied a lot as a kid. And a lot of the bullying, obviously, as the victim of the bullying, it felt unfair to me, unjustified. So, I think what was excruciating at the time ended up being this incredible gift that I knew

that I needed. I learned at a very early age to follow my impulses despite whatever kind of response it may evoke from the crowd.

It's funny how critics often assume you must be pushing buttons on purpose instead of it coming from exploration.

I hate when I see people demonstrating virtuosity just to demonstrate virtuosity. If you create something that's a little bit beyond what you're comfortable doing, then it really forces you to be zoned in on it, and that presence creates attention and a tension.

But we were doing that for a long time before I thought about it in that way. There's a thing in modernism of it being a curatorial act on the past and saying, "Oh, these are interesting things. What if we set them together, overlay them?" It's not just juxtaposition, but it's fusion and synthesis to create a new thing.

To me, your ethos is laid out in the very first song on the first album with the lyric: "Too smart to be a pop star, not smart enough not to be."

I've always been a little embarrassed by that one. I've definitely leaned into the bratty persona at times, especially in *Make Believe*, where I just felt like I was Jimmy Hart or some obnoxious pro-wrestling heel, and the band behind me is creating this energy. So then the singer is a way to channel and articulate that energy for the audience. It doesn't mean I'm really a pro-wrestling bad guy in my day-to-day life at all. In fact, I have the awareness of playing up the persona.

There's so much humor in all your lyrics. Even just the spirit of the work, while challenging, is fun to listen to because it's so unique.

I really appreciate you pointing out that you recognize the humor in it because in my mind, it's over the top. Obviously, there's some heavy themes at times that require a certain gravity, but I'm very, very, very aware of doing all I can to not impose my tastes on the work and just letting songs emerge.

That's what I'm getting at with the systems. People talk about how I'm prolific or something, but it's not like I'm prolific because I think being prolific is somehow meaningful in itself. I actually probably share 5% of what I make. It's just that there's nothing I'd rather be doing. I wake up in the morning, and I'm so excited to make songs.

When did you start to realize that the audience wouldn't always take your ingenuity as play?

As I get older, all the punk rock cliches of my youth just get truer and truer. It's almost like illuminated manuscripts. You can read these mythologies, and they'll have a narrative level that's just ridiculous, but then you have a different lens, and you can read deeper into what their meaning is.

So, *Bad Brains* was like that to me. I loved [Bad Brains](#) as a 12-year-old. It's like these are so fast and visceral. Then as a 25-year-old, I could hear *Bad Brains* again and be like, "Oh, my God. The technique that they're doing that fast is absolutely astonishing." And then at 40, as my own technique has refined, I can hear more of what they're doing.

If I'm going to make something that feels true, it has to contain paradoxes and contradictions and tensions. And that's what gives back to the listener what they're ready to hear in it.

It's interesting to age with music over time because hopefully eventually you realize, "I can do whatever I want."

Honestly, the biggest determining factor in what made me feel I could do these things when I was so young is there wasn't really anything around where I grew up except these two record stores, which I didn't know at the time were specialty shops that people traveled to. I had this whole system of cutting lawns, buying used records,

taping them, selling them back, getting credit.

So I heard Bauhaus's *The Sky's Gone Out* for the first time when I was 11. And side two of that record, I just listened to over and over. Then when I was 12, Can's *Delay 1968* came out. To hear Bauhaus pre-puberty and then to hear Can as soon as I'm hitting puberty, those just opened the whole world to me. So, it never felt like I was doing anything bold. I just thought that's what being in a band was.

In the Noisey documentary you said, "I thought that a band was supposed to be scary." To me, that delineates the difference between pop music made to appease and music meant to push back at whatever it's put up against.

Maybe the ambition is to rattle people, maybe shock them awake a little. It is simultaneously true that the world is a splendiferous mystery full of beauty anywhere you look, if you're ready to see it, and an absolute horror show, especially on a political level. It would be crazy dishonest to be, everything's great, go on with your day. And it would be just as dishonest to be like, "We're doomed. We live in hell." Neither one of those things is true. So, how do you contain both of those things?

How do you deal with a shitty review? Has that changed over time?

Jenny and I just got the masters back for our new album two days ago. We spent about a year and a half, writing it, recording it. It was an epic adventure. And when we listened to it, we're both just like, it doesn't matter if anyone in the world hears this or likes it. Just the fact we could make it is success in itself. That's the kind of truism that when I was younger, I might have known, but I couldn't fully embody.

I'm turning 50 in a couple months, and I feel totally at the peak of my creative powers, like I can execute what I mean to execute now with intentionality and impact in a way that when you're inside of it, like an athlete knowing when they're in shape or not. But I'm also at the absolute valley of the professional impact my output is having.

So, there's this weird thing with music where people want something new. And that's not some scold on the people in general. It's just like you have 20 bucks. Do you want to buy your seventh record by this person, or do you want to buy this new thing? I can't blame the world for that instinct to invest your limited resources in something you feel is newer, but it's tough as a musician because it takes a long time to get good.

And when I say, "Oh, I've been doing this 30 years," I don't mean I check in once a month. I've been doing this all day every day for 30 years. When I got the text asking me to do this interview, I was standing by the side of the highway at an off-ramp, picking up litter with one of those grabbers, and it was 100 degrees out, and there was definitely part of me in the back of my mind, "What the..." It's a little weird to be like, I'm 50 years old, I have a master's degree, and this is my job, picking up litter at this property next to a highway off-ramp.

I bring that up because I did teach college for 10 years, but it got to be this point where I was using so much of my creative energy to not make any money. I may as well make money doing something that doesn't take my creative energy. I just want to work as few hours as possible so that I can do my real work, which just happens to not pay well enough to live.

I think that's wisdom you can only fully gather once you're old enough to realize having a record on a big label, if you don't love the record, feels much worse than putting out a record you love for 10 people. I wonder, do you find peace in looking back on what you've made?

I never ever listened to the old records, and not as any kind of superstition or intentional thing. I always just assumed if there's 10 songs on a record, that's 10 problems I've already solved, so they're just boring to me, and I assume they're boring to everyone else.

When the Joan of Arc box set came out, the owner of the label had to come to Chicago, rent an Airbnb, and stand over me while he played them. I sat there and listened to the albums, beginning to end, and I was like, "These

aren't near as bad as I thought they were." I think subconsciously this whole time I'd be working on new stuff and think, "I hope people can like this even though I'm the guy that made those things." But it was a real meaningful shift to me to be like, "I hope people like my new record."

I think you couldn't make the late records without the early ones. The carte blanche you gain with experience is also like finding out who you are.

Oh, yeah, dude, 100 percent. I write a song, and then I listen back. I'm like, "Oh, my God, I said that? Do I really believe that?" I think the only people who really truly fail are the people who think that there's some right way that they need to conform to. Everyone has to find what works for them. And for me, it's listening to music. If I could only listen to music or only make music, I would 100 percent only listen to music. I need to see people play. I need to listen to records. I must be in the top 1 percent of how much live music I see. I see a ton of improvised music. I see a lot of house and techno. I see a lot of free jazz and drones. So, I definitely have a skewed perspective on making pop music compared to the music that I'm consuming.

I agree, I don't think I would write books if I didn't love reading. It's like, can I come work on your teeth even though I'm not a dentist?

Related to that, I can never believe when I'm talking to a friend who's making a record, and they're like, "I just need to write one more song for this record." Whereas for me, it's like if you're doing a gallery show, and you have a body of work, you probably aren't seeing every painting that person made. They probably made all kinds of more in the similar style and then chose the ones that went together in some way. So, when I'm making a record, it's definitely like editing a film more than generating materials to reach how much you think you need.

Before we go, I'd love to hear a little bit about what a day is like for you and how you keep your foot on the gas.

I'm obsessive with sequencing my activities in a way so that everything lands at the right time of day. I have 90 minutes in the morning that I refer to as "tuning the robot" where I need to do my meditation, my yoga, my reading, my writing. Things change depending on the hours of the shitty job at the time, but I can't believe that some people don't meditate. I would not be a functional person at all without taking intentional time to observe my own thoughts. So, meditating is fundamental. Exercise is fundamental. I guess I just need my body and mind firing to get my spirit firing. And I smoke a lot of weed. Weed certainly helps me hone in on the gravity of being and being so blessed I get to make these things. I just feel like the luckiest man ever born. It's such a fun ride.

Tim Kinsella recommends:

Art Institute of Chicago

Jerome Rothenberg's [Ethnopoetic anthologies](#)

Smart Bar

Disciplined daily schedule

Re-listening & Re-reading old favorites

Name

Tim Kinsella

Vocation

musician, author, actor

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