

On bouncing back and moving forward



Tom Krell of How to Dress Well on reconciling with failure, what it means to work in a reactionary way, and how our creative lives are tied to our own mental and emotional health.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2629 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Success](#), [Failure](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Promotion](#).

When you start to work on a new record, how much of the process is usually a reaction to the thing you made before?

It's always a reaction, at least for me. I'm very much a reactive person. I have friends who make music and they don't listen to any other music for two years while they are making a record because they don't want to be influenced. I, on the other hand, really treat my practice as kind of a reflection. I try to be an index of my situation, my cultural situation, my listening habits. My work is always happening in the midst of my listening habits.

I also tend to think I'm pretty reactive in the sense that my particular musical project came out of a moment where I felt like everyone was playing indie rock music. I energized my initial recordings through a real hatred of indie rock. I was like, "Fuck, this is really annoying. It's really culturally limited. None of these people give a shit about the music that I think is really valuable, so I'm going to chart this *other* course instead."

It became this path of listening and behaving and performing and practicing my art through recording. I started making this ambient music that was leaning on R&B and house music as the touchstones, the aesthetic anchor. But as soon as I started to feel like I was known as something, I started making a different kind of music. I think when I made my second album this tendency to push in an opposite direction annoyed people. People thought I should do a more gothy, dark R&B record. I remember Grimes saying, "This is fine, but it sucks. I hate when you go pastoral." I was like, "Fuck. I love this. It's exactly what I wanted." This became a kind of pattern for me.

For the last record, *Care*, there was all this talk of hybridization or crossing over from underground to the mainstream. Not that I was trying to be Charlie XCX or something, but I was trying to do something that felt like pop music while still being different from the capitalism-oriented notion of pop music. That was the idea, but aesthetically I couldn't land where I wanted to for a variety of reasons. There were a lot of pressures, personal and public and business-oriented, as well as aesthetic pressures. There was a lot of conflict around it.

And just to be honest, my life in the two years after that record was... it just really disappointed me. The reaction to it was hard. In many decisive ways, that led to making this record, *The Anteroom*, which was a hard record to make in so far as the last few years have been a difficult period in my life, just a really hard period to live through. The work is an index of that. I just didn't want to keep making some kind of minimally interesting R&B music, which is where I felt like I was being pushed.

I remember when I was making *Care*, my manager kept pushing me to collaborate with all of these specific pop

producers. I was just like, "No, I want to make *really* pop music, like Sheryl Crow, early-2000 pop music." I remember I was in this café in LA and they were playing something, it must be like a Spotify playlist or something, but it was the most milquetoast, fake R&B, fake pop, bland Spotify music, and it galvanized me to *not* make that kind of music. So I made a very pop record instead. My idea of pop. And then I went through what were a few very tumultuous years.

What does it mean if you make the record you want to make, but other people don't get it? Or if people don't seem to understand your intention? Does that make it a failure?

You know, to be honest, I didn't really like my third record very much, but it did well critically, and I was able to tour it pretty successfully. But I was a little bit decentered by that experience. After that I went on antidepressants. I've since gone off them, but I think that *Care* is my antidepressants record. In virtue of that, I also think it's a completely delusional record. Sill, there are some of my favorite songs that I've ever written on that record, like "Salt Song" or "Made A Lifetime," which I still perform.

I still think the things that were successful on that record unfortunately had to pass through a numbing chemical-induced illusion. I have people in my life who have to take chemicals to make it possible for them to even minimally survive. In that case, I think antidepressants and psychiatric medications play a meaningful role in people's lives. But for me, it destroyed my capacity to make an against-the-grade decision. And that was really revelatory to me coming off the antidepressants. I was like, "Oh right. I get it now."

As much as I am an art producer, I am also an art consumer and my art consumption is actually a big part of my practice. I think this new record reflects a return, or a kind of rekindling, of my love for deep music discovery. A big part of this record to me was reclaiming a truly deviant aspect in my art.

During that tumultuous time between records, did you play a lot of shows?

I did. It's funny, I toured a small amount with a band because my management at the time was like, "You need to have a band. That's how you'll get the TV bookings and festival bookings that you want." And I was like, "Okay, sure, I'll put together a band." And I hated it. I hated the experience. Still, we made a beautiful show and we got something together that touched people and it was worthwhile to me because we were going out and playing shows and people were moved by it. So it wasn't for naught.

But the record didn't do well critically and people didn't want to get behind it, so I wasn't really able to get the cool big festival going that the band was supposed to secure. So, I was like, "Let's just do this as a duo with me and my friend Ben." We did more experimental forms of the songs, things that were longer and more open-ended. I got to play some really unique things that way, including a show for the David Lynch Foundation. It felt good that we got to play some cool festivals that I would have actually gone to as a fan.

It seems extra complicated when you have people in your ear telling you what you should or shouldn't do, trying to figure out what's going to make things blow up.

That's the thing. People were kind of like, "Hey, we're gonna figure out how to make you a rich person from music." I was like, "Okay, this sounds great!" You know, that does sound good when you've been doing this for a long time. I have a life, I have people who depend on me for their livelihood. So, of course I'm like, "That sounds great."

The problem is that you find yourself doing things that, as a music consumer and fan, I wouldn't want to be a part of. I don't want to go to the fucking I Heart Radio Festival, as a fan. Ever. So it's like, "How on earth did I end up doing this?" I lost sight of the fact that following other people's decision making was going to have consequences for my spiritual experience and my work and my life.

If people had embraced that record, if you hadn't had that experience of putting a band together and going through all of that, you might never have made something like *The Anteroom*.

I think about this a lot. You imagine this alternative path or reality where everybody gets behind your work and it was a big success, what would that mean? Also, you have to question what your idea of success looks like. Relatively speaking, I did have success from that record. Being able to live off of my art is already a massive win, no matter what. We moved enough units of it. It wasn't a grand slam, but it was okay.

If that record had been a critical darling for what it was, I wouldn't have made this new record and, in a way, this record has changed my life. Making this record allowed me—and I know this sounds insane—but making this record allowed me to become the person that I want to be. I wouldn't trade out the hiccups from the last record for where I'm at now, personally or artistically. Also, I feel extremely blessed by the fact that I got in the music industry when I did, rather than even just four or five years later. I have a longterm contract with a great label. I'm in a good situation.

There's no way I could have made this record if I hadn't passed through so many different storms and moments of success and excitement. I did so much learning across that process. Something I think about a lot is... imagine a band like Joy Division, for instance. I am sad that Ian Curtis died because I wanted to hear that Joy Division album that sucked, and then the albums they made afterwards. I wanted to hear the record where they decided to do acoustic-guitar folk and everybody was just like, "Whoa man, what in tarnation?" I'm not one of these people who believes that everything happens for a reason, not by any stretch of anyone's imagination, but I'm extremely happy to have been able to follow this path.

So you have to have this relationship with failure just all the way through, where you constantly destroy every success and constantly destroy the paralyzing fear of every failure. But you have to also give credence to each of these moments in order to keep the thing afloat. It's a delicate sweet spot between maximal success and maximal failure, and letting those two things fight each other. I'm imagining a person climbing between two walls by just pushing off of each wall and elevating their body as they go. As they get higher and higher, obviously, they can't stop. You have to keep going, otherwise you're gonna fall all the way back down to the bottom.

How has your process changed over time?

Every record has been a difference scenario. I'm living now in a place where I have collaborators who I see every day. I was able to bounce ideas off of them while I was working on the record. For the first time ever, I had a studio context where my life for an entire year was, wake up and get myself ready to work on music for an indeterminate amount of time. If I wasn't working on music, I was writing my PhD dissertation, which I'm currently finishing. And they weren't two lives that happened in two different places, it was really integrated.

So now, since I finished the record, I've been making art for the record. I'm making this art with people I like and I'm making it down the street from where I live. This is the work that I'm taking out on the road. Visually, it's the first time I've ever produced an artwork that people will see from the first note of the record to the last thing you see before I walk off stage. This is the first time I've ever had the community around me to do the kind of the thing that I really want to do.

So in terms of taking this forward, the creative process feels so much more deeply integrated in my life. I literally feel like I've just now figured out what it means to be an artist. I'm working on my art all the time in a truly sick way. It's been just absolutely inspiring at every turn. The way I'm thinking and the way I'm working and my commitment to myself feels super deep.

Does that have to do with realizing that all of these things—music, visual art, academic writing and research—are not all discrete? They all complement and inform each other in some kind of way.

I think that's 100% it. Part of what works for me now is that I'm in a situation where I can just do things. I have the resources around me, plus my collaborators. Rather than send a million emails proposing something or asking permission, I can just do it. Another part of it is just figuring out myself in a more profound way. Another thing I think about a lot lately, too, is that I left Chicago under the pretense of going somewhere better to get rid of grief. And when I got to LA, I was confronted with a very shitty fact—namely, that all of the hell is *inside of me*. And that I am alone in this hell. Also, LA is an extremely isolating place. I hadn't really

reckoned with what it was gonna be like to live in Los Angeles when I came out here. It was still a bit of a dream.

The way that I metabolized that internal hell is just by learning to be with myself again in a really decisive way, and by inputting so much more music and doing so much more thinking. I'm still in the throes of doing this.

I was raised around severely disabled people, people disabled by depression, disabled by autism spectrum disorders, disabled by drug addiction. Being around all of those people, I developed a really intense... I don't know how to say it other than an "inner island." I think a lot of creative people do this. That inner island is the cause of all of my grief and all of my joy. I am able to completely refuse the outside world and just create in a completely zero-degree, super isolated way. But then I also end up quite alone at certain junctures because of that capacity.

Another problem with being on the inner island so much is that criticism, when it finally does reach me, is hard to shake. It's trapped there on the island with me and it will just echo in my head in an obsessive-compulsive way for months. And then other times, the kinds of criticism that I need to hear won't reach me at all. So I just keep going. That's the thing for me—I don't really know what I'm supposed to do other than just keep continuing on. It's not like a tragic hero story of like, fail again, fail better or something like that. It's just that I'm almost equal measure charmed and cursed with this will to live my life in precisely the way that I want to.

Tom Krell recommends:

De Leon's self-titled record from this year on Mana Records

Second Person by Gabi Losoncy (and a lot of stuff from Amphetamine Sulfate Press) and Half Light, the big Frank Bidart collection

Stephanie E. Hanes' sculptures

The Cradle of Humanity by Georges Bataille

Fabrizio Terranova's excellent and funny and lovely Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival, taken together with Donna Haraway's Companion Species Manifesto, and my relationship with my puppy dog Shrimp Scampi, who is my truest love and spiritual anchor.

Name

Tom Krell

Vocation

Musician



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