

# On learning about yourself through collaboration



Musician Tyler Bussey (Thank You Thank You) discusses why he doesn't like making music alone, the power of ceding control, the true meaning of success, and the importance of staying curious.

April 9, 2021 -

As told to Danielle Chelosky, 2279 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Process](#).

**How has the pandemic affected your creativity and the way you make music—whether that means your actual ability to have access to making music or your ability to stay inspired?**

I tend to approach music making as something that I do with other people. It's something where I like to actually be responding in real time and making decisions together with a group. Ensemble playing is the thing that I'm most excited by and interested in. Or even with just one other person. I'm not that interested in making music completely alone, and I really like making music that can be done in the moment with just the instruments that are in your hands.

And ultimately, the thing that I feel most driven to do, and I guess the thing that is the most compelling to me, is just performance. So obviously, there have been no shows, and performing for a video camera or for a live stream on your phone or whatever, it's not the same. You don't have the physical exchange that's happening in a room, and there's a mediator, so it's different.

So, for me, I just have spent a lot more time listening to music and playing, but not really with any sort of results in mind and not really playing for some immediate purpose like the way that you would when you're performing for an audience or when you're writing something that you intend to record and then put out. It's been a lot more just exploratory, and I've just spent a whole year doing that, which has been really engaging. It's been really exciting because frankly, it's the most time I've had to just devote towards thinking about music and exploring it and thinking about what's possible in it since I was young.

**I'm curious as to why you don't really like to make music alone.**

Well, I'm getting more comfortable with it now, but I think that there's a few things about it that I'm not crazy about. There's just something that feels more like a conversation or something that feels more like an exchange or interplay that you just can't do by yourself. You can surprise yourself, and I'm learning more about how to surprise myself so that I feel like I'm reacting to something, even if what I'm reacting to is something that I did. But that's something that I had to learn more about.

A big thing that I love about music is that sense of play with other people, and that sense of surprise, and that sense of anything can happen that is really hard to predict. And you're simultaneously getting to learn about how another person thinks and how they express themselves while also sort of learning about how you express yourself in response to that, and how they express themselves in response to you. It's a really interesting way to learn

about yourself musically.

**I thought it was interesting that this is your solo project, but you had a bunch of collaborators on the EP. Can you just tell me about that process?**

Yeah. A part of it is about relinquishing control. I think of it as like when you're swimming in the ocean and you don't get to decide how big the waves are. You're just going with something that is bigger than you. Being part of an ensemble can be like that, where you're not really in control of everything and then there's a lot of things you have to accept. I feel like choosing what to accept and what not to accept can be a creative act in and of itself, like a form of editing. But you're creating an environment in which things can happen. And sometimes just picking the people who are going to be in the room playing together is a form of creating an environment where things can happen. And maybe the group of people that you're picking have never played together before. So it's hard to say what's going to happen. And it forces everybody to listen a little bit more.

One of my favorite things to do is to play a show with a bunch of people who haven't actually rehearsed together, because when they play the show, they're looking around like, "What's happening?" And it forces everyone to pay attention and to listen a little bit, and it does feel like this heightened moment.

And it's so easy for when you're over-prepared or when you have everything under control that it just starts to sound too tight almost. There's no sort of chance elements happening or there's no confusion. It's completely scripted. And I like there to be a sense of tentativeness sometimes, because it sort of forces people to be a little bit more gentle and a little bit more intentional, too. Of course, you have to choose people who are that way, who are not just going to steamroll over everybody because they don't care. You have to choose sensitive people for that to happen.

I guess I would say I don't really think of it as a solo project. I do really think of it as a situation where I was guiding it, but really, everybody else was guiding it too in their own way.

**Did this collaborating happen in person before the pandemic, or was it through email during the pandemic?**

A little bit of both. Some of this was recorded and dreamt up before lockdown started happening, but a little bit of it was finished after that. And a little bit of it was recorded after. Yeah, in the case of the stuff that was recorded after, there were emails and files sent back and forth and that sort of thing.

**How did you react to collaborating through email when you're really used to collaborating in person and wanting things to be natural?**

It's funny because wanting things to be natural is sort of impossible when you're talking about recorded music, because recorded music isn't natural whatsoever. There's nothing organic about it.

But what can feel natural in spite of that is sort of just chemistry between different people. And it doesn't even register as weird or unnatural when you are sending something and getting something back that's amazing and beautiful. That feels like the most normal and natural thing in the world. Because the way I tend to look at it is that it's almost like that's what's supposed to happen. It's supposed to be good. If it's not good, something isn't working. The anomalies are when it's not working. So yeah, when you send something to somebody over email and they send you something back that works, it feels like the most normal thing in the world. That's exciting and it's great.

**Do you think that you will at some point consider Thank You Thank You to be solo or that you'll eventually do stuff that's completely solo?**

I think that part of it comes from being a fan of music first. I know a lot of people who started playing an instrument really, really young, and making music is extremely natural to them and they don't remember a time when they didn't do it. But for me, I feel like I was someone who loved music for a really long time, but didn't

really know how to play, didn't really know how to write or sing or make music for so long that I still think of myself as a listener and a fan first.

And really, a big part of making music for me is to just have more of a deeper fan relationship. Everybody that I got to collaborate with on this music is someone whose music I listen to and appreciate. So to me, it's almost more like I was throwing a party. That's more exciting to me than just being like, "This is what I can do. All you're hearing is what I am capable of," because there's so much more that could happen if I invite other people into it, I think.

So no, I don't... I mean, I might still make a solo thing at some point where it's me doing all the instruments that are making every single note and rhythm, that it happens as something that I put there. But even then, most people have someone mix their records or master their records. I think that the whole solo endeavor thing is bullshit. There's so many other hands that get involved at various stages of the process that it just feels disingenuous to me to take all the credit.

**Do you feel like you can understand music more and you're better at listening to music than you used to be because you're a musician now?**

I wouldn't necessarily say better, but there are things that I pick up on more with a sense of what the elements are and how they're working together, and more of a recognition of techniques and that sort of thing. I can recognize compositional choices and why they're there, or choices that the musicians are making and seeing them as related more clearly to other choices that other musicians have made, if that makes sense.

At the end of the day, it's kind of like speaking a language and it's like, "Do you speak the language or not?" You can be conversant in it in I guess a bunch of different ways. You might be able to describe something, but you might not be able to do it yourself. And if you can do it yourself, then it's a little bit of a different level and maybe a richer level of understanding.

**There's also people who think the opposite and think that getting into playing music ruins the magic. Do you feel that at all?**

That hasn't happened for me, but that's because I think that there's no bottom to it. I think that you might feel like the magic goes away if the process of learning about things and discovering things feels like you reached the end or something. But there is no end. There's stuff that I'll never understand. There is some music that definitely has gotten to be less magical in the sense that the Ramones used to be super magical. I didn't even understand what three chords were at one point.

But it stays magical in other ways. And in some ways, the magic increases. I think that some people have to work pretty hard at maintaining their level of curiosity and maintaining their love affair with music or art. And for me, for whatever reason, that hasn't been the case. I just keep getting more and more into it and more excited about it.

**How do you stay in tune with that? How do you stay curious?**

Well, this doesn't necessarily work for everybody and I wouldn't suggest that everybody try to do this, but I love reading about music, too. I actually do still read music criticism, and I get books about it. If you're a good music writer, I love you. I love that Alex Ross book, *Listen to This*. I read that. But it can be anything. It could be a good theory book.

I've got an [essay collection](#) on my desk right now that's the [Ars Nova Workshop](#) here in Philadelphia. They put together a short book of essays around the history of jazz in Philadelphia, and it was around Nels Cline coming here to do a version of "Lovers (for Philadelphia)." That's a project they did together. There's great stuff in there. There's always, especially I feel like in the past few years, just more and more information becoming more and more readily available. And it's just easier to find stuff that you didn't know about.

I'm 34, and there's so much music that I'm only still just finding out about that's been around for decades. No one was telling me about The Blue Nile until like two years ago. I was just like, "That was just here this whole time? I didn't know about it." So I don't know, I think that... Yeah, I mean, if you get bored with it, then that, I think, says more about you than about music.

**With making music, how do you define success and failure?**

Frankly, I just want to keep doing it. It isn't really about checking things off of a list. If there's stuff that you feel like it'd be great to do that you haven't done yet, or work with somebody you haven't worked with yet, there's a sense of completing a challenge. But that's not the same as material success or being rewarded for doing it. The reward is doing it.

To me, that's the more important inspiration. If you don't make money off of it, that's fine. And it feels better to satisfy a deep longing or a deep need than it feels to make money off something that you wouldn't have done otherwise. So I think that's how I look at it. I just want to keep doing things that engage me and are exciting and interesting.

**Tyler Bussey Recommends:**

Laurie Anderson's *Spending the War Without You* talks

Wendy Eisenberg's *Auto*

Friendship's *Shock Out of Season*

Taking lessons, and knowing it's okay to ask someone, "How do you do that?"

Ross Gay's "A Poem in which I Try to Express My Glee at the Music My Friend Has Given Me"

Name

Tyler Bussey

Vocation

Musician

□

Jeff Mertz