

On how making things can change your life



Musicians Matt Berninger (The National) and Becca Harvey (girlpuppy) discuss finding what works for you, learning from collaboration, and why the embarrassing stuff is essential.

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As told to Matt Berninger and Becca Harvey, 3566 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Beginnings](#).

Becca Harvey: How do you go about songwriting without playing an instrument?

Matt Berninger: It's evolved. I almost never come into a song with a bunch of lyrics already written. I'm always texting myself and I used to have notebooks and just also filling it with random bits and pieces that I might use later, and I usually only end up using 10 percent of what I write. I don't do any curating of my writing or thinking or anything until much later. I feel like I don't really dig in until there's music, and it could be the simplest thing, that's where I'll start to sort of be absorbed and to start to craft it a little bit.

Everybody in the band's kind of got their own little spots where they write and record and are always sending me tracks. Some of them have multiple parts and are kind of produced already, but others are just really scrappy, even sometimes phone recordings. I don't even think about the music, I just sort of react to it. Everything they send me, I will throw into GarageBand and just kind of freestyle and react to it, and I'll add another vocal track and I'll do it again, and mute that, then add another one, do it again, and I'll end up having, often, 10, 15 vocal mumble nonsense things all stacked up to a sketch.

Then I'll switch gears, and I'll do that on lots and lots of sketches. So there will be months and months where I'm not actually really thinking about doing any kind of crafting of songs, they're just reacting and throwing melody and paint at it and not analyzing anything. And then, I'll later go back. This is the harder part, going back and listening to all your terrible nonsense mumbles and trying to identify the little bits of it, like, "Oh, it sounds like I'm saying that, and I kind of like that." And oftentimes, you will just start saying actual words. But trying to find that little piece, really it's a small percentage of the stuff I throw at it that I feel like keeping.

All my favorite songs have multiple ideas cooking. A love song is never just that or anything else, they're always a weird collage of thoughts. And so, a record becomes just an uber collage of all those thoughts.

For this last record [*First Two Pages of Frankenstein*], there was a long phase where I couldn't write at all and nothing was coming, and it wasn't because of the music, it was 100% me. I couldn't force it, so just kind of waited it out until it started happening again, and the songs that happened out of that were what they are, and sometimes you just kind of have to say that it's done and put it out. It's kind of like a picture of a certain phase of your adolescence. And the songs change and evolve as you play them live, but most of the time, with us, our records are the baby, infant versions of our songs. They go through all their evolution live later. It's a matter, for us, of just making, and when it's over, you'll see what you made.

BH: That's such an interesting approach. You never have a melody idea that you hum into your phone or anything like that?

MB: Occasionally, but rarely. Mostly, it's just like, "Oh, that's a phrase I like," or I'll overhear something. Usually if it's a melody that just pops into my head, it's probably something off of some top-forty thing that I heard in Gap.

BH: Have you run into any problems wanting to learn an instrument? Because I feel like now, I am leaning towards learning at least a little bit of guitar, just so that I'm not doing the a capella voice memos. It works works, but... I want to, because my whole thing is that performing live, which I wonder if you have this problem, too? I sometimes feel a little bit awkward not holding anything.

MB: Oh my god, totally.

BH: Just having a microphone and pacing around and trying to do something with my hands. I've been telling everyone I'm going to have one song on this next record that I play guitar, just so that I have a moment to look like a musician on stage. Have you ever just thought about it in that way?

MB: I have. I took piano lessons as a kid, and just the anxiety of recitals and performing in front of people is when I stopped. It's kind of like sports. I played a lot of sports when it was just kids running around, throwing stuff around. But the minute they start keeping score is when I'm like, "Oh, I've lost interest."

This isn't something I want to win, or with a piano recital it's like, what? People are going to judge this? Yeah, no thanks. Once a year I'll like, I'll pull out a keyboard or something. I think you'll have a lot of fun. I'm blessed with so many friends just sending me all this stuff, whereas I'm like, my henpeck keyboard, Casio arrangements. I'll be like, "Oh, I was using one of the black keys." I'll be like, "This is going to blow everybody's minds."

My daughter's learning guitar. She took a year and a half of guitar lessons when she was little, but just like me, as soon the guitar teacher was going to have all the students play at a show, she's like, "I'm out." But then she's on her own, right at that age where I was at 12 and 13, where all of a sudden other people's songs, other songs felt like, "Oh, this is relief." This is a world, this is my world. This is a magical realm. That's what happened to me.

It was the Smiths, mostly, for me. It wasn't entertainment, it was literature. It was about life. It was about everything. She started picking up the guitar, learning songs from people on YouTube. When I go in and she shows me something that she's playing, she's mashing songs together and she's like, "This one needs a pick." And I'm like, "Well, you don't have to, I mean, you can probably just try a finger." And she's like, "Oh, it doesn't sound right." It's so good that I don't know how to play the guitar. I wouldn't be able to resist trying to help her. But the fact that I'm no help is, I think, really good. I like that music is something that I'm not supposed to understand what she's into, and it's really good. The more I see her falling in love with this thing stuff, it's becoming so much more apparent that there's no formula. It's a mystery of what works and what connects and what doesn't.

BH: My parents both love music and I was raised listening to music, so I never really got into the technical aspects, which I also think is a part of knowing an instrument. I feel lucky in that way, just because I'm not paying attention in a real technical sense. I'm loving it for what it is. She's going to have such a great relationship with it, just because you're not beating in like, "that note" or "that certain guitar part." She's just going to have it easy.

MB: Yeah, I don't want her to worry about, I mean, she'll get there on her own, but worrying about the technical aspects of tuning and stuff like that, who cares?

When did you first write a song and when did you first feel like, I'm going to put this in? Did you put any music

out or self-publish it in any way before you put records out?

BH: I first started writing songs when I was little. I had a music journal. The songs were stupid. I would just sing them around the house. The year I graduated high school, I wrote a song on guitar, but an out-of-tune guitar. I was plucking two strings with one finger, or something. I thought it sounded cool, so I put it on Bandcamp and posted about it. I've scrubbed it from the internet since then, because it's so embarrassing. But that was the first time that I made something and thought that, yeah, maybe I could do it again. But I didn't start really making much more music until 2020.

MB: It's a huge shift from being on your computer and then putting it into the world. When we started, we had to start our own label just to put something out. But I didn't actually feel like a musician until we put it out in the world. That is the hardest thing, because nobody's going to care for it, unless there's just the rarest of cases. But [TCI co-founder] Brandon was, I think, the only person that really said anything positive about our first record. It's like, well, we put it out and it was on, we sent it into the world, and it was almost entirely ignored.

But it wasn't totally ignored. And I've said this to Brandon before, and I've said it to lot of people, I think when he wrote something that I was like, "Yeah, one person gets me." And that was enough fuel for the next five years. It was our third or fourth, that record that started getting a little more of attention on audience. And now it's like, you can put out a lot and you don't even need to be on a label or anything like that.

BH: I released my first real song during the pandemic. I didn't do any promotion. I just put it on TuneCore so that it could go on all streaming services and posted about it the day it came out. I was embarrassed at first, because I was like, "This is going to be so random for people that don't know that I have ever made music." It got put on a H&M in-store playlist, and it lived its own little life. I didn't even feel like a real musician until I played my first show, just because it was the pandemic.

MB: Doing it in front of people and playing live, like we were saying, is a whole different dimension and really hard. That's even scarier. I've been doing it 25 years that every time I walk on the stage, I do feel like I'm stepping out into an outer space. I don't feel myself when I get out there. You find some other version of yourself and you evolve and you figure out a way to lean into it if you can.

BH: I used to be good at it. I could be really chatty, but I've gotten more nervous as time goes on, which you'd think it'd be the opposite. You think I'd get more comfortable, but with the more personal songs, I get embarrassed on stage.

MB: You know what music you connect to and almost always when somebody is saying this stuff out loud, they wouldn't normally say it out loud. That's what it's about. Emotional cliches sometimes can be the most embarrassing things to say out loud, it doesn't mean the lyrics have to be clever every time. That's a disaster when in a song every line is intentionally clever. Nobody's going to pay attention if they don't believe you, if they don't think you're being sincere.

Those moments that you're a little bit embarrassed about, are probably the best stuff. That's the essential stuff. If you're not a little bit wondering if this line's going to work. If you're like, "Oh, this song that's a hole in one," that's where you're probably in a danger zone. But if you're a little bit like, "I'm a tiny bit embarrassed by saying this, but I'm going to say it anyway," that's the best.

You cannot worry about what anybody's going to think about you or about themselves or about anything. The things that are stuck in your brain for whatever reason, because they're painful or they're funny or you just have to get it off your chest or something, those are the Legos that you build songs out of.

BH: Do you think where you grew up has any effect on your musical framework?

You don't think of Cincinnati as being a rock scene. I will say, just going to clubs in Dayton and going out and seeing bands at these little places in Cincinnati, seeing bands live was where I was like, "I want to do this." It

was listening to whatever it was still felt like it was transmissions from outer space, from these magical beings. But then when you go to see things live and you start to realize, "Oh, this is just a bunch of goofballs, they don't look as cool as I imagined them."

When you see a room of people, that's when you realize, this whole thing is not just a private experience, we're everywhere. People want to go to the same weird emotional places or get thrilled by the same strange stuff. You look around and you see you're not alone in those live things. That's where I was like, "This world is good. This is a good world."

I delivered pizzas for many years, I did hundreds of different jobs, but I remember delivering pizzas to places, and I'd also go to all these little weird shows and stuff, and I don't remember what band it was, but there was this guy, some goth kid, and he always had an arm bone, a human arm bone hanging around his neck. And one day I delivered a pizza and all of a sudden, the door opens and there he is, no arm bone, no makeup.

BH: Just normal?

MB: Yeah. In his pajamas. We recognize each other and I'm wearing my pizzeria hat and we were just like, "I've seen you out there." The weirdos are hiding everywhere. That was the part of it, where I thought, maybe someday I'll give this a shot.

BH: I remember before my first show, I was sick about it. The idea of doing it would make me so nauseous. Then I did it and didn't die. Now every time I'm like, "You'll feel that way for a second, but then it'll be fine."

MB: Nothing bad's going to happen. You'll realize that you're still getting what you need out of it. You might have to still work at Best Buy or anything else, but working at Best Buy is going to be so much easier when you know one night out of every couple of weeks or something, or you got a tour coming up and it solves so many problems.

If I still had to do something else to pay the rent, would I still be making music? I really hope so. Luckily with our band, we didn't get much attention at all for so long that we just got used to feeding off the songs and feeding off each other, and that was the only feedback we needed. If the five of us were like, "Yeah, let's put that on a record," or, "Let's play that tonight," if enough of us, or even only three of us, thought it was worth putting on a record, that's all the validation we really needed. The other two trusted the other three.

BH: It's hard for me with songwriting, I don't really involve anyone. I've always wanted to make songs with other people, but I never know how to approach that. How do you do it?

MB: Our last record had a lot of different singers on it because we were writing *I Am Easy To Find*. We were working with a filmmaker, and it was a woman at the center of the story. [My wife] Carin and I were writing. She wrote a lot on that record because we were writing for a lot of different characters and a mother and a father and a daughter and all these different things.

There's a thing where sometimes features with Sufjan [Stevens] or Justin Vernon or with Phoebe [Bridgers], a lot of times they are adding colors in area, but not necessarily writing a duet or a counterpoint. But occasionally, like the song that we did with Taylor [Swift], she wrote all the lines she sings on that. Aaron sent me a sketch and I wrote my part of that pretty quick and sent it back to him without any idea, I thought that was probably going to be the song. He sent it to Taylor Swift and she wrote melodies in between mine that were a reaction to my melodies and the words. She jumped right in and was able to inhabit that sort of space. I was also writing about my wife who's a writer, so there's this stuff about writing in a notebook. I think it was a real easy character for her to jump into. That was a genuine duet.

I've done that in other places. We worked on a musical, and writing things that were intended to be back and forth conversation. That was really challenging, a whole different type of writing. Sufjan and Annie Clark were early people that started doing little bits and pieces in the studio with us on our records, and it just was

like, "Oh, that's really refreshing to have a whole other brilliant brain coming in and pulling the song in new directions and that kind of thing."

BH : Were there a lot of songs on this new record that didn't make it? What do you do with those songs that don't make it?

MB: In the past, I think we would probably put them in the freezer and sometimes they would come out of the freezer, sometimes they would be resurrected in some other way, and sometimes we would play them live, but a lot of them would stay there and never be heard from again, which is also totally fine.

BH: How do you pick what songs that you release with The National versus what you do solo? And also, are you doing any more solo music ever again?

MB: The stuff on my solo stuff is just like anybody I'm writing with who isn't in The National, those songs will go on a solo thing. So I was writing with guys from The Walkmen and a lot of different people that have just been friends for a long time. That's kind of where that record came out of. I don't put on a different personality ever for anything. Just putting on any kind of personality that can survive live performance and just doing it at all is enough of a thing to try to work yourself into. I mean, there many times I wish I could put on a robot helmet or paint my face to create a character.

BH: How about Fuck, Marry, Kill? Fuck, Marry, Kill: writing, recording, and playing live. You have to say which one would you marry, which one would you kill, which one would you fuck, obviously.

MB: And I have to pick one of those things which I would not want to do anymore, right?

BH: Which would be Kill. Yeah, that would be kill. Fuck Is like do it once, marry is do it forever.

MB: Weirdly, I think I might kill performing live first. Marry is definitely the writing. The writing is definitely the marry part. That's the one I want to always do. Being in the studio for me feels more like that's the "fuck" part of it all, you know? That's like wild fun and that has real consequences. And you can't do it alone, really. So that's what it feels like. I think performing live is the thing that maybe ruins my brain more than any other part of it. It's not the act, it's not the being on being there, performing live in the moment. It's the turning it off, trying to turn it off and getting some sleep, and then the next night all of a sudden, in half an hour, you got to turn that back on. After a lot of that, that's where I go into the danger zone and my brain can get broken. The other two I would never want to stop doing.

Matt Berninger Recommends:

Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952-1982

Heir to the Glimmering World, Cynthia Ozick

The Graduate, Mike Nicols

"Clay Pigeons" by John Prine.

Chameleon hatches from egg (video)

Becca Harvey Recommends:

Stop Cop City and defend the Weelaunee Forest in Atlanta, GA

The song "The Suburbs" by Arcade Fire

The show The Other Two

Listen to your friends talk about what they care about

Keep a dream journal

Name

Matt Berninger and Becca Harvey

Vocation

musicians

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