

On channeling the artists you admire



Musician, actor, and director Michael Shannon and musician Jason Narducy discuss failure, being dedicated to your part, and not having any particular plan.

February 6, 2026 -

As told to Miriam Garcia, 2986 words.

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Both of you had bands as teenagers: Jason with Verboten and Michael with Jehovah's Suspects. What did those early experiences teach you that you still find helpful or relevant today?

Jason: As a young musician, I started off playing other people's music, and here I am still playing other people's music, like R.E.M. I think that's a really healthy thing for young people to do: learn other people's music and see how other songwriters tell stories and how chords make sense together. But then I started writing pretty quickly, trying to learn from my heroes. And I was very fortunate to start early, so I had a lot of time to learn from people I loved.

Michael: Yeah, I'd agree with all that. The idea of playing rock and roll is such a daunting, intimidating thing. You look at these rock and roll legends, they're like gods, and then you start breaking down one of their songs, and you're like, oh, this is actually pretty simple. At least what it is, what it actually is. You realize that most of what people are drawn to is the passion of the musicians and the people making the music, and the charisma that you can actually write thousands of songs with three chords. But this is not a big secret, at least in the music industry.

What was the original intention behind performing Murmur on tour? Was this driven by your love of R.E.M.'s music, or by the desire to play together?

Michael: Well, Jason and I have been playing albums together for years. We've played albums of all different stripes and artists, kind of all over the place. I don't even know if there's necessarily a through line, really, with it. It's just the Smiths, Neil Young, the Cars. It's kind of all over the place. But this was Jason's idea to play Murmur. Because we had just done The Modern Lovers, not too long before, Jason called me and said, "Let's do another one. That was fun." And I was like, "Ah, okay, what are you thinking?"

And it just kind of popped out of Jason's mouth. Well, it's the 40th anniversary of Murmur. And I thought, oh gosh, that's a tough one, but we went for it. I mean, I guess we haven't really played any easy records, but yeah. I mean, I feel like pretty much anybody who cares about music, I'd say this, and I might regret it, but for the 99 percent of people who care about music have gotten something out of R.E.M.'s music. So it was kind of a no-brainer, really. It didn't meet with a lot of resistance.

I noticed this project exists only as a live performance. Did you ever consider recording or releasing anything?

Michael: Yeah, I've been getting this question more and more recently. "Are you guys recording?" Which is interesting because we are playing someone else's music, but I guess it makes people curious about what kind of music we would make if we made our own music. They can't honestly be asking if we're going to rerecord R.E.M.'s music because I don't think that would be the way to go, but maybe we should take a step. Look, I mean, I'd be fascinated to see what kind of music this band would make if we were just left to our own devices, because pretty much everybody in the band writes their own music. And it's a wild array, a variety of musical styles between us. I mean, a lot of real estate is covered, but I don't think we really have time for that now.

Jason: The rest of us work with other bands and do studio work and touring work. And this is a very different thing, that we're just incredibly fortunate that people are interested in seeing us in most markets. There's this short story about us playing in Dublin four months ago. We had never been to Dublin before, so this is our first show there. But the show had sold 1,300 tickets. I'm walking to the venue, and there's an Irish pub just a block away from the venue. The doors are wide open. It's packed with people. I think it's people who are going to the show, but they're having a drink beforehand.

I walk past it, and because the doors are open, I can see inside, and there's a big screen TV. They are showing YouTube videos of us performing in the US, and it stopped me in my tracks. I had to get out my phone and videotape it because I couldn't believe what I was seeing. But there's just something about this project that is a magnet for people who enjoy music the way we do. And we hope we do it. I hope the audiences sense our humility as we play it and sense our joy. They hopefully see our smiles as we're playing these songs because it is a celebration. That's the way we see it. And not like a party, like we're all getting hammered, but it's just fun. It's just fun to be together. It's fun to play these songs, and it's fun to play shows where people are excited to hear how we approach it.

For this particular project, what does creative risk or failure look like?

Michael: Well, I guess that's more in the minds of the people watching it, really, and what their expectations are when they come. It's pretty clear to me that the failure would be someone listening to the song we play and thinking, "Oh, this sounds terrible. This doesn't sound anything like R.E.M. I'm really disappointed." And that used to make me really anxious, but through repetition, particularly when we're touring, when the tour starts, I'm a real nervous nelly.

And then by the end of it, I wouldn't say don't care anymore, but I've gotten to a place in my own mind where I'm like, "Well, this is what I'm doing, and you can love it or leave it." Just because there's a certain exhaustion that comes with touring, and it kind of drops into you, the music kind of just drops into you in a certain way. I wouldn't say you get more comfortable with it, but you're just not as nervous as you were when you started. Plus, you've gotten along the way some affirmation from some people that they don't mind you doing what you're doing. Failure, I mean, life is failure. That's what Samuel Beckett meant: "Fail, fail again, fail better."

Jason: I like what Mike said about not caring but caring, because that's a healthy perspective for me. I went to college in Baltimore, which is an American city that is known for its row houses. And back in the '80s and early '90s, the first floor would be where the bar was, too. So they were very small bars, so they couldn't fit drummers. So there was this whole culture in the late '80s in Baltimore of acoustic performers and acoustic bands. And I was in one. I had two acoustic guitars on bass, and we could get tons of work. You had to play four hours a night, but we would play three or four nights a week. And that was maybe the healthiest music education I got because it doesn't matter how the gig is going, you're playing tomorrow night for another four hours.

And, [Ian MacKaye](#) from [Fugazi](#) and [Minor Threat](#) says it well too, which is, "I care, but I don't give a fuck." That's a really healthy balance, and it's maybe not achievable for everybody. I feel fortunate that I feel like I have some of that, and it's just good for me. I played a Sunny Day Real Estate show a couple of months ago where the guitar amp just didn't work for the first six songs of the show, and I had to stand there and kind of pluck around while the crew was working on it. And I was fine with that. I knew there was nothing I could do with it, but I bet a younger version of myself would've felt a little bit more panic, a little bit more nerves.

That's a great thing about touring, is that you're just playing so often that your mind starts to think about what

you need to do to play the next show and what you need to do to get through this performance in a healthy way. But as far as straight-up failure, I think this was kind of a risky project. It's a little audacious, it's a little precocious, it's a little, hopefully not presumptuous. And there are going to be people who don't like it, and that's true for any endeavor, but I don't see that as a failure. It's going well so far. And as long as we're all enjoying it, I see it as far away from a failure as possible.

For a project like this, what does progress or evolution look like, if it exists at all? And, is that something that you are even interested in?

Michael: Well, for me, I relate it to the experience I have listening to R.E.M. concerts, which I do when I'm on tour. I don't just listen to the albums, but I listen to live shows that they've played, and I can hear, depending on what year it is and what album they're touring with, you can hear their own evolution through what they go through. And it's really interesting when you listen to the concerts because a lot of times what they're playing is, and this isn't uncommon, I guess, with bands, but it's not exactly what's on the record. It can be different.

And I get a big kick out of hearing when Michael Stipe just starts free associating and doing different things, and I've even started attempting to incorporate that into my performance without making people think, "Is this guy crazy? What's he doing?" But I like the playfulness that Michael developed from life on the road.

I think the evolution's just being less uptight about making it pristine and actually trying to get to the impulse behind the music. Some people say when they see us that it's not so much that we're covering or impersonating R.E.M., but it's like we're channeling them. And I take that as a very high compliment because I do feel like that's the best summation I've heard, the best adjective I've heard, or verb I've heard for what we've been doing with this project.

Michael, I've been watching videos of you performing songs by David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and R.E.M. What is your process of channeling the physicality of your performances as both an actor and musician, while also maintaining your own identity as a performer?

Michael: Oh, gosh, I don't know if I'm super worried about my identity, frankly. I've never been all that worried about my identity. I guess that's one of the reasons I got into acting in the first place. I wasn't so interested in being myself, but I guess the identity or the through line is just my attention to whatever it is that I'm doing. But for me, if you're watching that, you're seeing me; it's like an act of devotion on my part because whoever I'm pretending to be in that moment is somebody that I admire a great deal and that has given me a lot in my own life. And it's my way of expressing my gratitude for that.

Some of those people aren't even here anymore, but that's it. I'm not even necessarily trying to present my version of something because at the end of the day, it's not necessarily what I think I'll be remembered for, which is fine, but it's more in the moment because I'll tell you one thing, I don't sit around watching videos of myself on YouTube because that would be really pathetic, but I'm glad that they exist because a lot of people don't get to see it at the time we're doing it. But although it's always better to be there in person if you can.

Looking back at your individual careers, can you identify a defining moment when you leapt into something new or felt truly out of your depth?

Michael: Well, gosh, it's everything. That's everything and nothing. I mean, that's all I do is walk into new situations with new people. But on the other hand, I've gotten very used to doing that. But there's nothing regimented, or there's no pattern to my life at all. I mean, I guess this tour is starting to become a kind of pattern. When February rolls around, I know I'm supposed to start learning R.E.M. songs, but that's about the extent of, it's all random.

Jason: I had a moment that is related to R.E.M. I'm a guitar player, but in 2005, Bob Mould asked me to be his bassist. So I started touring with Bob in 2005. The following year, in 2006, a guy named Robert Pollard, the singer from Guided By Voices, was doing a solo tour, and he asked me to play bass. And the very first show was at

the 40 Watt. So this is 19 years ago. Guided by Voices and Robert Pollard are known for playing a lot of songs live. I mean, I think there were 52, 54 songs on the set list. And I remember very specifically walking out on the stage to start that show. I looked down at the set list, and I started to blank on song titles. I was like, I don't even know what song that is, let alone how to play it, because there are so many on the list.

And then I thought, I'm not even a bassist. What am I doing here? And then I look up, and at the bar, the 40 Watt Club in Athens, Georgia, is not a huge place. I look up at the bar, and I see the silhouette of one Mike Mills, one of my favorite bass players and musicians of all time, at the show. And I thought I might just keel over right there. I just felt completely unqualified. And fortunately, I got through the show, and I'm glad that I was open to that change, that diversification, if you will. But there was a moment there where I saw Mike Mills, and I thought, "I'm out of my league. I should not be here."

Michael: And then he wound up playing bass for you on one of your records.

Jason: Yeah, that's right! Good point. Glad I stuck with it. I'm glad we got along.

Michael, you've said there isn't much of a pattern to your career. Is that intentional?

Michael: I don't know how much of it's my choice. I mean, unless I start producing things, which I'm not really interested in at all, I kind of just wait for someone to ask me to do something. That's just how it works. But I don't have some big plan for anything, really. I never have. I'm just kind of here, but I like to play around and do fun stuff, but I don't have a big super objective.

What makes you say yes or no to a project at this point in your life and career?

Jason: For me, the first thing that comes to mind is trust. It's a pretty big commitment to prepare for a tour or prepare for a record. And if I don't trust that the person I'm working with is going to be there, be prepared, or potentially cancel, then I try to avoid those situations. So trust is kind of the first thing that comes to mind. And then I've been really fortunate to play music with artists that I love. I love the music, and that's no judgment against musicians who are more of a hired gun or session player, where you're showing up and just playing whatever is in front of you. I have total respect for people who do that, too. But for me, if I'm going to spend that much time and energy, I want to lose myself in the music. And so far, knock on wood, I've been fortunate to do that.

Michael: It's about the people a lot of times. I'll meet somebody, and I'll think, "Oh, I want to collaborate with them." They seem interesting, intriguing, and they don't seem like shitty people. And then doing things that are new or unique or surprising or unexpected or even audacious. Like something Jason said earlier, there's a certain kind of audacity to what we're doing. It's kind of ridiculous in a way, but I've always really been drawn to doing ridiculous things. So I totally understand what Andy Kaufman was up to. That point of view makes a lot of sense to me, just doing seemingly absurd things, but making them feel like they make so much sense, seeing if you can convert absurdity into rationality.

Jason, you've spent decades navigating bands, personalities, and touring. What has helped you sustain this kind of life over time?

Jason: I surround myself with musicians who are good people at their core and also have a strong desire to play music under any circumstances. I try to set my own example of preparedness and calm.

Jason Narducy recommends:

Music: Hannah Frances (Nestled In Tangles)

Book: Martyr! by Kaveh Akbar

Music: Graham Hunt Timeless World Forever by Graham Hunt

Candy: Junior Mints

Film: Hamnet directed by Chloé Zhao

Name

Michael Shannon and Jason Narducy

Vocation

musicians and actor, director

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Christy Bush