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On approaching all of your work with the same creative spirit

Entrepreneurs Nadine and Tom Michelberger discuss co-founding the digital platform PEOPLE, and what it means to let your creative energies power all of your most important work.

So much of your work has always been about facilitating creative spaces for people, whether it be a physical space or, now, a digital space. How does the PEOPLE project fit in with the other things you've done?

Nadine Michelberger: I have the feeling that everything we've done has led us to this current endeavor—particularly our relationship with Bryce [Dessner], Aaron [Dessner], and Justin [Vernon]. We've done many things together in the past, so there is already this deep level of connection. PEOPLE feels like an extension of that, a logical next step.

Your hotel in Berlin is well known among creative folks, particularly among musicians. How did things evolve from opening a hotel to organizing a music festival to now helping launch an online platform?

Tom Michelberger: Well, we realized over the years that we naturally formed friendships with a lot of musicians. A lot of different people come to the hotel, but the bonds we've created with musicians are particularly special. The hotel itself constantly feels like an experiment. These days you might see a lot of other hotels with a similar aesthetic, but when we started nine years ago it was very different.

Having a hotel like ours, which also has a restaurant, and doing all of these special events on the side, we've been able to focus our energies on it. The ambition was not to expand or open other hotels, but to focus on what we do here specifically. The biggest excitement for us as entrepreneurs is our independence. From the beginning, we really focused on who we work with, knowing where the things come from that we engage with, paying attention to the same qualities we enjoy in our private lives, and bringing that to our work. That kind of natural, personal evolution—versus over-conceptualizing things from the very beginning—is what has made this place so vibrant. It makes it feel human.

There are not too many places that take that approach because the other route is, in a way, actually easier. The biggest thing we brought to the table was ourselves. Everything has always been done in the spirit of, "Okay, let's just do it ourselves." Rather than copy what someone else had done, we would ask ourselves: If we were going to put on a festival, what would it look like? It always really comes from a place within us and the people we do stuff together with. I think that creates these special experiences.

So doing a festival, or working on PEOPLE, it was about asking, "If we would do something like this, how would that look? What is important to the artists? How can we create an experience that addresses everything people have been telling us they want to change?" As owners of a hotel, we meet a lot of people. We listened to them. We became friends. The hotel just became the home base for all of these other kinds of projects. It gave us a foundation to think freely and take some chances on things.

Nadine: Exactly. It's coming from our own place and our own joy and that is the meeting point for all of these projects.

Do either of you come from an arts background? Are you artists yourselves?

Nadine: No. Neither of us.

Tom: I feel like an artist.

Nadine: Yeah, well, then I'm also an artist. [Laughs]

Tom: I definitely do not feel like a manager of a hotel, even though I am. Everyone is an artist of life and their different expressions. And different people are good at doing certain things. I think one of the greatest joys is seeing people do the thing that they are really good at doing. Putting the beta version of PEOPLE together, the whole thing basically got assembled in about 48 hours. Aaron got so much of it together while traveling between London and some other big festival.

It's cool to see artists take charge of things that they're normally left out of. I think that's the core of this idea. We're not building another streaming platform. This is really a place for artists to immediately upload music and then, in the process, experience immediate feedback. I think it really comes from this idea of, "What do the artists want? How can we provide more tools than they already have?"

Nadine: The capacity to create things is something we all have inside us, but it gets buried and covered up by the usual routines of stress and work and relationships. We waste what could be creative energy by complaining about the work itself, or whatever it is. So how can we create for ourselves a situation where our creativity can just come to the forefront? Music feels like one of the easiest ways to inspire that energy in people; it provides this very natural channel for people to access those feelings. I think it's amazing to create something that allows people to connect with that part of themselves.

As a platform, PEOPLE was really inspired by your music festival, which is all about collaboration and creation. It has the same spirit to it.

Tom: When we did the first version of the festival, the majority of the artists there weren't really used to doing something super collaborative like that. No one knew what to expect. Most of them agreed to come and try it out because they were friends of ours, or because they knew Aaron and Bryce. The idea was that everyone would spend a week hanging out and collaborating on new music, and the week would end with two nights of shows. No one knew how it would go or what the result would be. It was really amazing to see how differently everyone felt—and how excited they were—five days later. The first two days everyone was like, "Oh, what is this? What am I gonna do with all that freedom and with all of those people?"

And then it just took off. The rooms would all be filled with different groupings of people having jam sessions, and people quickly discovered that if you have this shared space with people you trust and you just let go of whatever expectations you have, then people just naturally start to play and express themselves. They are reminded of why they made music in the first place, to play and have fun and express themselves. The collaborations feel very natural and communal. It feels good to be in a room doing this with all of these other people, and to realize, "I don't need to go be by myself in order to make something."

What would you like to see happen with PEOPLE? How would you imagine it being used, say, a year or two from now?

Tom: I hope that it remains sustainable and that people use it. You know, we don't have external funding, there are no sponsors for the festival, and there's also no public funding being used for any of these. We're not applying for grants. We're not looking for patrons. We're really excited about the aspect of self-responsibility that this project represents.

This is a project that really does feel entrepreneurial in a way that excited us. Artists should be able to have a solid income from what they do, just the same as any other person who works hard at their job. I would love for this project to become something that empowers an individual artist to not have to be dependent on a record label or on applying for grants. I would love to see this as a place where every individual can slowly grow this feeling of, "Okay, I'm actually in charge of my entire life. Not just with a guitar in my room, but actually in all parts of my life."

Nadine: Not only is the artist side of PEOPLE important, but the way audiences can interact is equally important. It's not about what some marketing person is presenting as the best song on a Spotify list, or whatever. Instead, they have an access point to this musician. It's a chance to experience new things being worked out in real time, which is something that audiences at our festival really respond to. These open hearts and faces, smiling and feeling touched by getting to witness all of these collaborations and this new music that has literally just been created.

It's exciting. So many music festivals now provide almost an identical experience, often with almost identical lineups. I feel like people are craving some kind of different, somewhat unpredictable, experience.

Nadine: Absolutely. Seeing the way that people responded to the festival, we just kept wondering what we could do with that feeling—what we could create that would be an extension of that.

Tom: There is so much stuff that gets in the way, that happens in between the time an artist makes something and when the listener can receive it. So many opportunities for it to get damaged or distorted along the way. Even with the hotel we experience things like that—all these interfaces, like Booking.com and other things between you and the person who is coming to enjoy what you've created for them. It's so much better to be able to interact directly with the person.

We feel like we really have an opportunity here to show what's possible if the control and the empowerment of where the content is created is taken back. Because that's where the fun is. That's where people have the feeling that we can actually change something. It's not just a musical project for us. It is really the opportunity to make something that's sustainable for people who do things and make things themselves, and to empower the individual instead of the complex business structures that surround them.

There is a certain simplicity and clarity of vision to all of the projects you've created. How hard is it to protect that?

Nadine: Oh, it's not hard, ever. We are very, very clear with what we want to accomplish, most of the

time. When we did the first festival, we were pretty sure it would be a one-time thing. We are not in the music festival business, that's never really been our interest. It's more about being able to create moments and make space and time for each other to create. That was the framework. But once we saw what was happening and how people reacted to it, not to mention how many of the musicians involved really said they felt changed by the experience, it felt like something we should continue to explore.

Tom: We live in Berlin, which is full of start-ups and entrepreneurial people. We've seen how, even if you have a really good idea, if you don't have a clear sense of how you want to grow and what is really important to you, it just turns into another watered-down product. First of all, it's really important to consider where the money comes from. "Who are you obligated to satisfy?" "Why are you doing this in the first place?" I think Nadine and I answered those questions pretty early on in our lives—back when we were teenagers, really—and now with the hotel and PEOPLE and the music festival, we've been given the opportunity to define what that looks like for us.

Also, the process needs to be fun, you know? We're creating something fun with people we love, so in a way it's really not risky as long as we enjoy the process. You just have to let your intuition guide you. It should feel right.

Creating something new can be hard, but it should still be fun. That's always a nice thing to remind yourself of. Something can be incredibly hard work, but still enjoyable.

Nadine: Of course. If you have joy, it's just about building momentum and being happy where you are. It's about being eager to move forward. That's all we need.

Tom: Not that we don't have our struggles, but the vision for this thing is what pulls us forward. Everyone involved with the PEOPLE project—Justin, Aaron, Bryce—are mostly interested in making the kind of thing that we ourselves would want to use, and that would also make a difference in our own lives. It's an excuse to do something together, but hopefully it becomes something that lots of other people can use and enjoy too.

Some things that were important to us over the past few years:

For us, some of the greatest energy Spots on earth are Hanalei, just off the coast of Kauai in Hawaii and Santa Cruz, a small city on the east coast of the Portuguese island of Madeira. Both are places with the most amazing nature and people.

As an inspiring person we would say Byron Katie. We went to Ojai to enjoy her work, and learned a lot from it.

When we need a break in-between everything else, we watch our favorite feel-good movie, Nacho Libre.

Name

Nadine and Tom Michelberger

Vocation

Hotel owners, Festival organizers, Creative entrepreneurs

Fact



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