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On forging new spaces for sharing creative work

Musicians Aaron and Bryce Dessner discuss the motivation behind the creation of the digital platform PEOPLE and what it means to have an open space to share your work.

PEOPLE seems in the spirit of a lot of things you guys have done in The National, exploring unusual ways to collaborate with people and circumvent the regular system of how the music business typically works. What made it feel like this was an important thing to do?

Bryce Dessner: We've been playing music in a period of time where industry archetypes and the standards for how things are done have shifted quite a lot. We've also been playing in bands and writing music in so many different ways, collaborative ways, and at a lot of different levels. We've gone from playing in small venues to no one and then playing in large venues to lots of people. We've had a good amount of time to think about this stuff.

We had an experience a few years ago—where this all started, really—which involved Justin Vernon and our friends Tom and Nadine Michelberger from Berlin. It involved a bunch of other artists that we invited to be part of this residency at the Funkhaus in East Berlin. We'd done a lot of festivals in the past, but this was something quite different. It was more focused on work and process and collaboration and having no plan. It was the opposite of a normal festival—there was no set schedule, no program, no headliners, no artist fees. Even down to the last minute, there was no guarantee of who was going to play with whom. Basically it allowed for musicians to come together with the least artifice and just be themselves. There was none of the baggage that comes with heavily promoting something. We were able to get in the room with each other and just make stuff.

The experience was transformative, and we thought, "Why can't music just be like this all the time? Why can't we always feel this way?" That started the conversation that would eventually lead to us creating PEOPLE. It came out of this physical music experience that we shared. It was one week of playing and collaborating and then two days of performances that were very impromptu. A lot of them were un-amplified. The people involved spanned genres and styles, which was also exciting.

That was basically the origin of this idea—How do we reach more people with this? How do we do it again? We started to think it'd be great for some of this music to have a place to live, a place where people could create and have fewer barriers about process.

Part of the issue now is that the distribution of music has evolved to such a crazy degree through streaming services and the internet, but it doesn't reflect the way musicians actually work. There's still this barrier to setting up a release in a traditional way. Even people who are dropping it overnight, whether it be the Beyoncé's of the world or something, it's still very planned. It's harder to easily share something in the moment. Aaron and I are recording right now in Paris and we can literally finish something in five minutes and put it up on PEOPLE 10 minutes later, then take it down the next day, change it, put it back up. It's that kind of thing.

What would be your fantasy of how someone or a community of people would be using this site, say, six months or a year from now?

Aaron Dessner: The goal of the platform is to be a type of garden where creative ideas and seeds that we plant during physical events and residencies can grow and have a more three-dimensional context. We're excited about how people can use what we call "the white space"—which is where you can add images or text or scribbles and associate them to audio files. That part will evolve.

The hope is that the PEOPLE experience becomes something like the experience of digging around in a record store, like people used to do, looking for something interesting. Then, as far as the community itself, it becomes a place where everyone remains linked to everything they work on and it's very easy to discover things, and to travel through recordings. The goal is for everyone to be connected in this way that you don't really see on streaming services, which are much more two-dimensional, because there's just so many artists there.

PEOPLE is already growing fast, but I think it'll always grow organically, artist to artist. The hope is that it becomes sustainable and kind of a model of co-working amongst artists, and an exciting place for an audience that's interested in things that might not be polished or marketed in conventional ways.

We haven't really designed it as a replacement to the music industry. It's something meant to exist in a parallel universe.

Bryce: We have thoughts about what's possible, but what's more interesting is what we *don't* know yet. We've seen this in some of the less commercial or non-commercial festival environments we've been able to be a part of. You do start to notice creativity shifting in a way, where basically people just try new things. For example, Aaron's project with Justin [Vernon aka Bon Iver], Big Red Machine, is really the first example of a new project or type of music that came out of this environment. It's about them envisioning what they could do in the PEOPLE environment, where they're creating collaboratively with many different musicians.

I think what's exciting is to think of the new types of music that might come out of this. As the platform starts to populate with musicians from distant corners of the world and with people working in radically different styles and genres, potentially having that music merge and coexist in an interesting way is very exciting.

Obviously, there's certain artists on there that are very popular in a traditional streaming Spotify environment, but there are others who are not. On places like Spotify it can be really hard to actually see everything that you've worked on, even if you release albums under your own name. I have records where I've composed most, if not all, of the music and it doesn't even come up under my name. It's hard to credit all the musicians involved, particularly those working in a more experimental environment. This is an opportunity to hopefully do that.

Also, being able to release things that are works in progress or that you wouldn't necessarily release in a traditional way is exciting. For example, The Long Count is a project that Aaron and I did almost 10 years ago with a bunch of collaborators. It was something that just seemed impossible to record. The minute that we had this outlet for it, we started sharing things. We're able to show our progress with it. We can put up some demos and then slowly start to replace those with actual finished versions of the songs. It makes the project feel real to us in a different way and it gives us a goal to work towards.

Aaron: In terms of the process, we probably don't even understand what kinds of work this will facilitate yet. Big Red Machine is a good example. I don't think the record would exist without this kind of platform and this community that came together to make it. We took the music to a certain point and then we reached out and sent it far and wide to a lot of people. You see on every song—we've only posted four—but you kind of see the whole record as a thing where 30 or 40 or 50 different people feed into it. We've viewed it from a community standpoint. We haven't started a band, taken a press photo, and we are not going to spend the next three years of our life promoting it. Still, we're incredibly excited about it, as excited as we would be for any album we might make in another situation that's more conventional. But this feels like something new—the process felt different and the outcome felt different.

I think we all hope that there can be a lot of music that's made specifically for this kind of model and this way of working. On the backend, the way that you upload and the way that you link artists and list everyone as contributors and share revenue however you want, leads to a new way of thinking and a new way of creating, which is the key to it.

Do you imagine that artists might use this as an alternative to other platforms if they just want to put their music out into the world?

Bryce: I think that for a certain kind of artist, it might work in that way. One big thing we should say about this is there's no obligation to PEOPLE itself. The artists retain all their rights and it's really a situation where everybody parks their music there, how and if they want. With this early version of the platform we're basically just trying it out and we're seeing how it resonates with artists. We've all been thinking about it for a year, but we want to see what other people have to say.

Aaron: We hope that a lot of people will choose to just have their music on PEOPLE and to have it be done in their own special way with a lot of context. We also see it as an aggregator and a publishing tool essentially. We see it as something that can connect to physical events and reflect artist-to-artist relationships, where the process really happens. How people choose to publish things, whether they want it to live only on PEOPLE or if they want it to go wide out into the world, is up to them. It's full artistic freedom in that regard. We're building it in such a way that it does integrate with other distribution platforms. That was an important step.

For musicians, the desire not only to collaborate, but to be able to publicly share and discuss process, seems to be something people are increasingly interested in. I'm thinking of PJ Harvey, for example, working out songs in a gallery space in front of an audience. For musicians the creative process is often something talked about, but rarely seen. There's a layer to this process that, ideally, you're helping make visible.

Bryce: We certainly feel that. Whether it be spending eight months writing and recording a record with the National or three days jamming with friends on something totally new, you go through these phases where you're really enjoying being a musician and being in the moment. Those are the moments that remind you why you were drawn to this kind of life in the first place. Then somewhere along the line, you see a lot of unhappy artists, a lot of unhappy musicians, who are not really being served by the institutions, whatever level of institution we're talking about. They somehow lose themselves in that world. When you think about the level of artifice that goes into releasing music, where you have to promote it in these strict and traditional ways, it can kill the part of it that feels creative.

I think part of this is an opportunity to remove some of that and to get closer to that initial impulse of why you're doing this. The hard part of sharing your process—of letting people see the literal evolution of the work—is that it also means letting them in on the hard things. I hope people are willing to share that part of themselves too. Justin Vernon has done it a bit already where he's just putting up voice memos about the things he's thinking while he's working on something. I love that—showing the seams and being more transparent about process.

Aaron: We also want it to feel like a level playing field. Those hierarchical benchmarks, whether it's how many YouTube streams or how many Spotify plays or what score you got on some website, those things are external to the creative process. That stuff is part of a promotional infrastructure that is put in place to market and sell music.

Oftentimes, obviously, we've benefited from those kinds of structures, and we play in a band that headlines festivals and stuff. We're just trying to create a situation where we can feel creative every day. If I put up a microphone in our hotel rooms or in the backstage and just play some guitar, we can put that stuff up just because it's a good feeling to do that. We don't have to take a photo and write a press release every time we do it. Just keeping it incredibly simple. Somehow, right now, a platform for that doesn't exist.

I think about the Grateful Dead and live recordings and bootleg culture, which was a major part of our history getting into music. In some ways, it's connected to that. It's like field recordings. If I want to record the frogs at Long Pond and put that out, I can do that. And maybe there will be people digging

around on the site who would be interested in that. Maybe not a lot of people, but still.

Bryce: Of course, there are precedents for things like this. You see moments in time where the culture hits with a model that you can really use to foster creativity. I think it's partly the times we're living in. The culture around online music and art feels like there's a distance between the process and the work itself, between how it's represented and how you hear it. It feels a bit disembodied. PEOPLE is an attempt to get closer to the work itself and to the people making it.

Musicians have often talked to me about feeling trapped by the system, chained to things like album cycles and promotional tours. You would think the internet would be this great liberator—and in many ways it can be—but finding ways that you can circumvent that system just to be able to share work or be able to say, "Oh hi, here's this is this thing I'm working on," is weirdly difficult. It seems like such a no brainer sort of thing, but it's amazing that it's been so hard to figure out.

Aaron: Absolutely. We have talked so much about wanting to have something that's connected directly between artists. The minute there're managers and agents and labels and publishers and all this infrastructure of the industry coming into contact with it, there's an inertia that creeps in. You can feel the old system trying to intrude.

Big Red Machine is kind of funny because we put up four songs, but we haven't done any of the typical things that you would do when you launch a project, and there's a lot of questions about that. I think those things are good. We're just kind of figuring it out as we go, experimenting and trying to learn how you create something that encourages maximum creativity and artistic freedom in a way that's hopefully sustainable. Can it be done? I think it can, but there does have to be a growth process. It's been a really fun project so far. We would love it to grow laterally and vertically and spread far away from us and into diverse corners and let people make of it what they want to.

All artists are different. Some people are precious about their work. They don't want anybody to see it until it's in its most perfect form. But there's something wonderful and vulnerable about sharing things that aren't finished necessarily, or not being so precious about it, saying, "Oh, I just made this thing," and being able to immediately put it into the world. I feel like there are a lot of people that crave that. Having some way they can do it that feels safe is pretty wonderful.

Aaron: Exactly. Everything you just said. Yes yes yes.

5 Dessner-related collaborations:

Big Red Machine

The Long Count

Forever Love

Planetarium

Dark Was The Night

Name

Aaron and Bryce Dessner


Vocation

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Fact



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