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As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 3624 words.

Tags: Music, Podcasts, Inspiration, Process, Beginnings, Collaboration, Day jobs.

On the power of curiosity

Podcaster and musician Hrishikesh Hirway explains the evolution of his popular 'Song Exploder' podcast, how to turn an idea from nothing into something, and the complications of making room for your own creative work when your other projects are all-consuming.

You are a musician, but for many years now you've been producing podcasts. Are there transcendent gems from the creative minds you've interviewed that have helped you hone your craft as a musician?

Unfortunately, as I've gotten deeper into the podcast stuff, I've had less time to do music. My big goal is to balance things out so I can still make music and also have this regular day job that I've created for myself on the side. Right now, the balance is all out of whack. I'm internalizing a lot of the lessons, but I haven't often gotten to actually incorporate them.

The thing that I've really appreciated most is learning a meta lesson across the series, which is that there are so many ways to make music and they are as individual as the people involved. For so long, I was caught up and concerned with the idea that the way I made music wasn't right or wasn't professional enough, wasn't good enough. I would always be trying to compensate or feel self-conscious about how I'd gone about something. It felt a little bit like trying to do my own taxes. I just felt like the stakes were high and if I screwed up, I wouldn't even know.

I felt similarly about making music both in terms of the writing, recording, and producing of it. The nice thing about Song Exploder has been realizing that there are so many songs that are great and successful both subjectively to my ear and objectively out in the world. When the artist breaks it down though, you realize that there is a lot of messiness to it. I always highlight and include any moments of failure, or chaos that go into the music-making process. This is my little bit of bias that I present in the show because I'm so excited to hear that someone has made this great thing, but look at all this uncertainty and failure that went into it before it became a success.

It's nice to understand that we're all seeking and searching. What was the biggest driving factor that motivated you to share the stories of other musicians via something like *Song Exploder*?

Honestly, it was practical more than anything. I wanted to offset the uncertainty of my life as an artist. I was so excited for a few years to be making my living as a musician. It was a dream for so long, and then finally it came true. Somewhere around the fifth year or so I was like, "Oh, this is what I'm doing to support myself." I realized my relationship with music had changed somewhat because of it. I was haunted by the economics of having to rely on it. I was feeling threatened by the idea that I would have to think about music differently in order to keep relying on it as a way to make a living. When you compound that with the idea that I am scared of making a mistake or doing music the wrong way, putting an economic anxiety on top of that made me feel so nervous all the time that I was just screwing everything up and as a result wouldn't be able to pay my bills. There were two answers I thought—I could somehow magically become so successful that I didn't have to worry, or I could figure out some other day job scenario that I felt excited about. That's where *Song Exploder* came from.

I had been listening to podcasts for maybe a year or so and was really feeling inspired by that medium, and especially how punk it could be. For so long, I had read magazines like *Tape Op* and I was trying to learn about how people do what they do. I always loved those kinds of insights. I thought if you could somehow tell those stories in an audio format there could be an even more direct show and tell between the creative process and the result of that process. Then there was a part of it that harkened back to my days in college and being an art major and doing crits where you had to put your work up in front of everybody and explain, "This is what my project is and this is why I did it. These were the choices I was making—

what I was aiming for." I always loved those kinds of conversations.

It felt like a way to combine all these things in a form that used the skills that I had been working on developing as a musician—thinking about how to put together someone's words and music. There's a lot of editing and shaping that goes into it. I never had a background in doing that kind of work, but I did have a background with doing remixes. When I thought of cutting audio, that's what I thought of, like, "I'm grabbing this sentence and then I'm going to play this, and then I'm going to grab this sentence and I'm going to play this."

Since you hear from artists time and time again on *Song Exploder* that mistakes are okay, are you less hesitant about mistakes in the podcast form, or are you approaching it with the same perfection as music?

I think I'll be able to take that lesson when I go back to music and the subjective art of it. I think meticulousness is something I end up seeking even if I don't want to. With music, I see an escape hatch away from meticulousness. With *Song Exploder**, it feels like it's just so ingrained in what it is. Even if that's the message, I haven't been able to incorporate it in the medium.

What do you find most creative about the production of your podcasts?

I think the show ends up feeling to me like design. The parts that are creatively exciting are the same parts that I find exciting about design, like crafting something orderly, taking a story that meanders or gets half-forgotten and then half-remembered and figuring out the logic to it. I really like the process of choosing the moments of the music that I'm going to ask about. That's how I prep. I go through a song, because I get to live in the song and look for all the fun, hidden sounds and things that spark my curiosity. Then when I do the interview, I can isolate a part and be like, "What is that? Where did that come from? How did you make it?" Being able to work that into the episode is really fun. I just like talking to people too. I don't think I realized that so much. I guess you talk to strangers all the time, just in everyday life, but I'd never done it in a way that felt so integral to my life. I really like having these very intense conversations with people. I get a little sad when they're over. I always have this feeling at the end that we had just gotten so deep, now we're going to be friends. That very rarely happens unfortunately.

Are there elements you're most excited to talk about with musicians every time?

I always ask about the birth of an idea. I want to know the origin story of a particular feeling. Like, "Did you have an experience that led to this feeling that then got translated into this kind of melody or this arrangement choice?" It's always really gratifying to talk to somebody who can pinpoint that, because it's hard. It's hard to know where art comes from internally. Sometimes there is a link. Sometimes you can be like, "Yeah, this happened and then I had X, Y, and Z thoughts and that led to this lyric and that became the song." Being able to do that kind of archeology is really exciting.

Would you be able to ask yourself the same questions about your work?

For the songs that are the most meaningful to me, yeah. That's one of the things that I put out to artists when they're going to do the show. Because there are great songs and huge hits where it's like, "I don't know, it was easy and I did it in five minutes. It was just magic." There's something to be said about that kind of experience, but there's also not a lot to be said about it because it's mostly ineffable and inexplicable. You can't really make a great show out of it. I've always asked artists to pick a song that is the most meaningful to them or has the most personal backstory to it. Those are the ones where I can articulate something.

Sometimes when creating a new venture, you're spending more time answering emails and doing administrative work. Does it still drive it forward knowing you're getting that stuff done?

There's a part of making the show that feels both like a drag and also something that I feel strangely addicted to, which is just having to do the email work, especially when it comes to booking stuff. I send a lot of emails trying to see if an artist that I want will do the show, like a daydream. There's a potential that lives in that where it's like, "Maybe if I just send one more email or follow up one more time, it'll break through and it'll finally happen." Sometimes it feels really pointless, but then sometimes it works out. Sometimes it's luck and sometimes it's determination and I never know which one it is. Because it takes relatively not that long to send a single email, I can end up filling hours with these small little transactions as opposed to doing the more fulfilling creative work of thinking about the story, an edit, or how it's going to all be put together.

Do you find equal joy in the conversation and the edit puzzle?

They scratch totally different itches. I like that I get to do both. They're hard to compare. It requires a lot of focus and clarity when it comes to the edit. You have to be like a detective in the interview and know how to comport yourself to get the best response and know when to back off. I like being able to use multiple parts of my brain.

You've been amazing at creating elemental podcast concepts that allow for many different stories to be told through one specific mechanism. How do you go about shaping something that has a long life and allows for many different viewpoints?

Even just creating a container is the way that you allow for a lot of different viewpoints. I was excited

about the idea that two completely different kinds of music could be presented in a similar way. Because it's easy to see the differences between the two. It's easy to hear instrumentation, and tempo, and lyrics, and style, all these things, anybody can hear that. It's more interesting to think about the ways creative processes can be similar.

All cases of trying to create something start with an idea and then you have to take a certain number of actions to make that idea come to life. What were those steps? How did you go from nothing to something? I think the unwritten part of the *Song Exploder* idea is creative willpower. Obviously, the only songs that get talked about on the show are ones that got finished and put out in the world. They're all going to be success stories. That equalizes them in some way. Then you get to talk about what the individual steps were and you realize how infinite the answers are to the question of how do you take this idea and make it into a reality.

Has producing *Song Exploder* helped you better articulate things to collaborators and better understand the balance of energy and emotion that goes into a successful collaboration?

I think so. I work with another producer on the show now, Christian Koons, who started originally as an intern. His role in the show has expanded and grown over the years. It was a really interesting process to try and communicate something that felt so intrinsic to somebody else like, "Here's how you identify where the beginning of the story should be, here's how you identify what a good ending is, and here's how you treat those things." The middle of the show is the easier part, but the beginnings and the ends are really hard, and how to explain the moments where you need to let some music play underneath, let it transform to be part of the score of the story, and then what parts to not have any music play.

I started to realize the subjectivity of the show as soon as somebody else was involved. I've had to learn how to articulate ideas that to me are very clear. That's been really neat. You can only take it so far. There are some times where there's no way for me to express this or it's quicker for me to just show than to tell. It is definitely something that I've gotten to learn. I think I've been able to incorporate that into other parts of my life, to be able to say, "This is what I mean, and this is what I was hoping to do."

The act of letting go, is that something that comes naturally or something that's a challenge?

It does not come easily to me at all, in anything. With both music and with podcasts, it's a lesson that I think my soul and my psyche needs to learn and I've been trying to force it to learn by creating these situations where it's like, "Okay, I am going to give these things up." I want to do new things so the only way to do that is to ask for help.

You have a great analytical mind, but also appreciate the artistic nature and the beauty of the form itself. Does the analytical desire follow into other areas? Is there something you hold sacred and don't want to touch?

The things that I'm most excited by, music being the first among them, are things that I want to dive into the most. If there are things that I hold sacred, that doesn't mean that I don't want to learn about how they're made. It's the opposite. I want to know *everything* about it. I want to know about the people who I think are exciting and inspiring. I want to know how they work. It's the same with art as it is with people. When I'm in love with it, I just want to spend all my time with it and just find out as much and I consume as much as possible.

Is curiosity the greatest lure?

Curiosity is related to it. This sounds pejorative, but also novelty I think or discovery. These are all connected I guess.

I seem to remember, your father was working in flavor labs.

He was a food scientist before he retired, yeah.

A song is different than a taste, but our senses also flow into one another. Did any of your father's work influence what you do in the podcast?

Funny. I did a piece for *Pop-Up Magazine* called "Cookie Exploder" where I did a *Song Exploder*-style investigation into a cookie that I really love here in L.A. I interviewed the chef about how she created the recipe. Part of that piece was also about my relationship with my dad and how differently we think about the world. The idea that he's a scientist and I am not. We approach things really differently and have a hard time communicating about that. That was layered into the piece as well. A lot of times I feel very far apart from him. We're close, but in terms of the way that we think, we are living on different planets.

I will tell one story about my dad that I feel has influenced me so much. I remember my dad had gotten some new strange flavor of potato chip from the store. I was like, "Dad, what is this?" He said, "Something different." I think that was a driving factor for him. My dad was in product development. His whole job was predicated on the idea that people might be willing to try something new. I was like, "Yeah, that's right." I'm very much a creature of habit when it comes to this stuff but I find myself looking for something different when I go to the grocery store just to be like, "Okay, I know what I want. I know this is my safe bet, but what else is there?" It definitely comes out in the potato chip aisle because I really

connected to that. I'm like, "Oh, here's a new flavor. Maybe I'll try it." Different adventures can be justified just with the words "something different." That totally comes from my dad.

Do you find yourself seeking silence? Do you need a buffer between the input to find focus or are you someone who can take a lot of input and keep going?

I crave input. It's harder for me to be around silence for too long. I definitely want interaction with people, with the world. I want to take things in and I want to be able to react to it, and then have that reaction be public. I want to be able to think about it and then make something where I feel like the world is interacting with it. I want to have that constant dialogue. I have a restlessness that I think constantly needs to be sated.

After having had so many conversations about music and sharing the way it's all put together, are you fine with people going through the mechanisms of your music? Is it open source and laid bare?

I think it's going to be tricky to get back to doing music because of this very thing that we were just talking about, because of the restlessness and need to interact. I think I actually do need some quiet and actually more than anything else, some boredom. I need some space where my brain is not 100% occupied. My brain needs to downshift to 40% occupied in order for me to write songs.

Is there something that puts you in this state?

Driving, a long stretch of highway where you don't have to think about the directions or anything and you're just going. That's an experience that I don't have. I work from home. I don't get in my car that often. Taking a shower is a small version of that. Things like that. Those are the better circumstances for me to write.

I think because of this restless instinct of wanting input all the time, I can't turn things off and start writing. Because again, the immediacy of answering an email or sending an email to daydream about who could be on the podcast is a lot closer at hand and the results are a lot more within reach. I know what the steps are going to be to make an episode of the show and then I can put something out in the world and people can be like, "Hey, here's a thing, that didn't exist before." Whereas to do the same thing with a piece of music, I don't know. It might take me a year to finish the song. I don't know if anybody's going to listen to it or if it's going to be any good or anybody's going to care about it. Do I really want to go through all that? In a conversation like this when I think about my life, yes I do, but in the minute to minute existence of my life I'm like, "Okay, do I turn everything off, silence my phone and go into the room and spend six hours and who knows what's going to come out, or do I just try and go get my work done?" Within the last several years, it's just me getting my work done.

I don't want to blow your cover but the other day we were talking about your dream of narrating audio books. What's appealing about that idea?

I like using my voice. I like singing. I like talking. It's also always been so fraught because the way that I do it is with stuff that I make. I have to take authorship of the lyrics or the little bit that I write for an episode of the podcast. It's similar to dreaming about doing a cover or guest vocals for someone else. I would equally dream of someone just saying like, "Here are the words," giving me a song that I think is great and saying like, "Will you just sing this?" I would love that. Similarly, narrating an audiobook is like, I just have to be responsible for the execution of this thing. For better or for worse, I have no stake in the authorship of it. That feels like something that could be satisfying while also leaving a lot of room for my brain to occupy a space that lets me make music. It's a little bit like driving.

Hrishikesh Hirway Recommends:

Five things: "Something Different," chips edition, in honor of my dad

Dill Pickle Kettle Chips

Ruffles All Dressed Chips

Jalapeno Pringles

Terra Sweets & Beets Vegetable Chips

Salsa Verde Doritos

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Vocation

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