

# On what you can learn from a collaboration



Musician and producer Aaron Dessner (The National, Big Red Machine, Taylor Swift) discusses the appeal of collaboration, the power of getting lost in a song, avoiding burnout, and why each time you begin a new project it feels like you're starting all over again.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2402 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Production](#), [Collaboration](#), [Adversity](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#).

**You've always been someone open to collaboration, whether it's writing songs or recording or playing on someone else's songs. What do you get from collaboration? Why is it something that you come back to so often?**

I think collaboration is so deeply embedded in my psyche, as a twin. [My brother] Bryce and I grew up basically doing everything together, including when we learned instruments and when we were creative with instruments, we would usually be playing together. But then I think even more than that, for me, I think it's like the social experiment or something, where it's a way I feel most comfortable making friends. When we were kids, a lot of my friends are people we played music with. That's been as an adult, too, where it's like partly the weird life of being in a touring rock band for more than 20 years, most of the big friendships I have are creative ones.

A lot of times it's an amazing way to get to know someone and share something personal and creative. My favorite thing about collaboration is that I learn. I'm able to get inside other people's brains or musical personalities and benefit from it. Whether it's discovering new techniques or hearing how someone's musical mind works and learning through osmosis. I guess it's both personal and creative. It's both personal and musical for me, where I feel like you make very close friends that way and you also grow.

There's something to me, that vulnerability you have to have to actually collaborate, to open yourself up to someone. That's the most important artistic thing I do. That's very much at the core of the great machine, for sure.

**Have you ever had something that seems good on paper, but when you get together with the person, nothing comes of it?**

That's never happened to me. I have had difficult experiences in the studio, but it's usually because it's more like trying to produce a band or something, where you're stepping into an existing group dynamic. I know that, that would be hard. The National is one. It would be not the easiest thing to like insert yourself into a kind of complex, slightly dysfunctional sort of creative family. But I've never had the experience of hitting a wall when it's just trying to make new things with friends, even in very unusual circumstances.

**With something like your work with Taylor Swift, where you didn't know her at first and you started collaborating remotely during the pandemic, was it weird to not have the initial, "Hey, let's sit in a room together and hash stuff out?"**

No, that was the interesting and serendipitous thing about the collaboration between Taylor and me. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, even from the first hours after I sent her a folder of things I'd been working on. She wrote "Cardigan" so quickly and it felt like we wrote it together somehow, in the room. It was literally just the music that I had made basically as it is. When she sent back "Cardigan," a few hours after I'd sent her the music, it felt almost like we architected it together in the room because of the progression of it, and the completeness of it, and just structurally, the dynamics. It was surreal to both of us how realized that felt. Then it just kept going.

I think I realized all of the work that I'd done over the years, writing songs, essentially in a similar way with The National maybe prepared me for that. Not to work remotely, and not be in the same space with someone, because with National songs you also have to imagine the song. You know, create something that has a structure that [National vocalist] Matt [Berninger] can carve into.

**Because you do collaborate so much, have you ever sat down to just do something entirely on your own and thought, "I wish I had someone to collaborate with here"? Is there ever that lonesomeness of making something entirely by yourself?**

Yeah, for sure. I think because I make a lot of music, I get inspired or really moved by something and then I wish there was someone just sitting next to me that could run with it, because it's a little bit of a lonely pursuit. Because I could then write all the words and try to sing it, finish it, make a final, make something that feels done. But to me, it's always felt more interesting to bounce off someone else or to have someone else's input. More recently, there have been times, like with some of these Big Red Machine songs I sing, where it becomes clear in my head what it's about.

That's been a fairly new feeling, but in the past I feel like I've enjoyed that feeling, almost like a venture, this thing where I'm trying to make music that causes other people to sing or to hear, to see a scene that they want to depict or capture.

**As you've become a more well-known producer, do you find artists approaching you that don't quite fit with what you want to do? I imagine it could introduce collaborations that don't feel as natural or organic.**

I think I've dealt with this ever since I started to collaborate outside of The National, because at first it was working with just those guys for many years, and then doing weird art projects with my brother, or helping to play some of his classical stuff, or doing things with [Icelandic artist] Ragnar [Kjartansson]. Things that felt very natural and close. But as you start to work with other songwriters, in general, I try not to worry about how something will be perceived as much as can I hear something. Do I hear a way to actually help someone. The times where I have heard that are the ones that really work, where I can feel inspired when I hear someone's music or voice, and there's a sound in my head I can chase.

**How do you avoid burning out? Last year you made the Big Red Machine record, two Taylor Swift records, and other records...Plus, you're also a human—a father and a husband, a friend, a brother.**

To be honest, I go running. When we were making records, the early National records, we would work for seven weeks without stopping. I realized that actually you can't, you hit a wall after a few days. Even four days of really intensely working, the ideas...It can start to be diminishing returns.

**You've won multiple Grammys. You've had other kinds of accolades. How, in 2022, do you define success?**

Success is when I can listen to a song and get lost in it. Like actually drive too fast because I'm completely lost in the moment. Because, that's how I've always listened to music. I once got a reckless driving ticket because I was driving too fast on the highway. I was listening to a live version of [Bob Dylan's] "Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" from *No Direction Home*. It was just so intoxicating I just couldn't believe how much I got completely lost in it. In the moment I stopped thinking critically about it. It's pretty hard for me to get to that point actually. So that honestly, to me, is success.

I mean, it hurts when critics or anyone, someone, doesn't like something that you've done, it always hurts. I think it's almost like being bullied about something you love. You put so much effort and love into something and working with people that you love, and then you have to wake up and see what some person thinks of it.

The more you can tune that out and just stay close to the thing you love and why you made it in the first place, that's what success is. Whether it's commercially successful, it really just depends. I think a lot of that is luck or the zeitgeist of if you happen to strike a chord. I've had both.

**When would something feel like a failure? If something's not working do you abandon it or do you keep trying to find the thing that you can pull from it, that will make sense and make it come together?**

When I've had failures, it's almost always because they're compromises that have been forced upon you by someone external to the collaboration, or you're forcing it yourself. I also think that no matter how many songs you've made, or how many records you've made, each time you start again, it feels like you've never made any. Whenever we start a new National record, for example, we always feel like we've never made a record and we don't even know how to write a song. And, it's like climbing that mountain again. It feels like the first time.

**I think a lot of people have the idea that if you do something once, and it has success, suddenly it's easy. But, in my experience, and judging from the people I've spoken to on TCI, there's no real formula. You finish a book, it's a bestseller, but now you have start all over again, and nobody may care about the next one. It rarely ever becomes a breeze.**

[The Creative Independent] logo reminds me of this metaphor we often use where we say we're "circling the vortex." It is true that you can have something that's working, and if you have the persistence to really keep circling the vortex, you will eventually unlock something about it, which allows you to push it, to elevate it into a place where it is fully compelling. But you have to have that relentless willingness to keep chasing it. Sometimes it shouldn't be that hard, but it's a funny thing actually—Sufjan [Stevens] once said this to me. When [The National] were making *Boxer*, and we really hit a wall, we had to give up halfway through and then start again. And he said "It's going to be a good record because of that struggle."

There's always one or two songs on a record, whatever record it is, that are the tricky ones, but you see them through. Sometimes there can be these lightning in a bottle moments where it's somewhat instantaneous and you just accept it. Then there's other times where it's this long arduous struggle to find it. I think both are important. Taylor said this to me, numerous times during the period that we worked together, which is that it seemed as though for both, her and for me, everything we had done in the past has prepared us to move at the speed that we were moving. It all felt like all the experiences that we had and techniques were colliding in a way that allowed us to go at this weird light-speed for a year. It was also just the fact that the world had slowed down and there was very little outside distraction because of that.

**You've set a precedent of lightning speed with Taylor Swift. If you worked together on something else, would you try to follow that same situation, or was it unique to the fact that it was during quarantine?**

I think in a lot of ways it is unique to quarantine, but I also think you have a flow with someone, you understand each other. That's it again, the thing I love about collaboration, you feel like you know someone in a very deep way, it's just so personal. So, I don't know if we did more together, if it would beat that same speed, but there is an understanding and there's a communication. A shorthand, emotionally.

**Taylor Swift's fans are experts on her output and have specific ideas about her work. They've embraced you as a collaborator, because you made records with her that they enjoy. Did you fear, at all, that you'd create a record they hated? You'd have this very large audience of people mad at you.**

While we were making *Folklore*, I had moments where I would wonder how it'd be received because she has such a passionate fan base. They're all encyclopedic about her songs and her collaborators and it was a little scary, but one of my favorite things about Taylor is the way she makes everybody around her feel confident and appreciated and fearless, literally, to quote her own song. But I think first of all, no one outside of the two

of us and Jon Low, even the people that played on the record, really knew what it was. So it felt like this cocoon that we were in to be creative. It was very conducive to not having anxiety. It created this environment that didn't feel anxious and I didn't worry. And luckily people fell in love with it.

We were actually on the phone as it came out midnight July 24th or whatever, just drinking wine and enjoying seeing the reaction. She had kept it a secret that she made a video for "Cardigan." There was a lot of surprises and fun, mystery that that was going on. Whether I knew about things or not. You know, for all of us that worked on it, it felt like we were able to do our best work because we didn't feel insecure or exposed or anything. It's a special thing about her. She didn't make me feel the shadow of her accomplishments.

That's something that I've been thinking about a lot, music for the sake of making it, or being creative because it makes you feel good or gives you hope or gives you a spring in your step. Don't think critically or don't have self-doubt in the moment because it is paralyzing. Later, when you're done, you can always see what you think is worthy of sharing, and what isn't.

#### **Aaron Dessner Recommends:**

Bess Atwell - Already, Always

Charlie Crockett - Welcome to Hard Times

Honoré de Balzac - *Cousin Bette*

Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guébrouv - Ethiopiennes, vol. 21: Emahoy (Piano Solo)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky - *The Idiot*

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