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On the appeal of profound collaboration

Producer Ariel Rechtshaid on the path that led him from playing in bands to producing them, understanding the push and pull of deep collaboration, and why it's important to never stop learning, experimenting, and making new things

We can't always predict where our creative lives are going to lead us. For example, you went from being a person who played in bands to being a successful and sought-after producer. I'm curious what that transition was like. Was there a point where you realized like, "Oh, maybe this is what I should really be doing?"

I think I was just drawn to what I enjoyed. That's really what it was. I could say that playing in a band wasn't paying the bills and producing was, but that wouldn't be very honest either because at the beginning things were pretty strapped in both situations, and I just carried on in the studio. The truth is I tried being in a band a few times in my life, and I think it's the sort of thing that if you're a musician and you're still a kid, that seems like that's a really fun thing to do. If you find yourself in a situation where you have the opportunity, obviously you would do it. But I think that early on I just realized I was in touch enough with my feelings to realize that there was something off about that, and it's probably a lot of things. I probably wasn't confident with my own writing yet early on. Actually, I definitely wasn't. I can say that for sure. I wanted to learn.

And by collaborating with other people, I felt like I was learning. When I am producing someone, I feel like I'm learning from them as well. Again, none of it was a conscious decision, but if I look back on it, I always liked to explore and learn and grow. And I think that artists sometimes grow when they collaborate with other writers or producers. Back then, when I was playing in a band in the early 2000s, I felt like I didn't know any other writers or producers. I didn't even really know that that was a thing that existed. During the time that Foreign Born was a band, I was learning a lot about recordings and records and different ideas and techniques. Suddenly, that's what I did. And I did a lot of stuff simultaneously. I would do a record and then I'd maybe go on tour a little bit, but nothing was so full-time that it demanded all of my time. It was the combination of everything that demanded my time.

I think a band is a hard thing to keep together anyway. It's the type of thing that everybody involved has to want to dedicate their whole existence to, otherwise it won't work. I think it was clear I was happier sharing my time by collaborating with other people. That's the way I look at it. There was never a day where I was like, "You know what? I need to become a music producer!" But I certainly had moments with the band when you find yourself in a van in Ontario asking yourself, "What am I doing?"

But I think everyone has those moments, whether it happens in a van, on a bus, on an airplane, or whatever. And that's not to say that there isn't a lot of amazing stuff that comes from being in a band, but everybody has their own things in life that make them happy or inspire them. And for me, it's just being creative in the studio on a constant basis. I take breaks sometimes, but I like being driven by working on a few albums a year rather than one album every few years, which is what usually happens if you're in a band.

The role the producer plays can be so amorphous depending on the producer and/or the band. You're called upon to be a collaborator, drill sergeant, therapist—any combination of those roles on any given day. What do you think of as your role when it comes to being a producer? And what is it that makes you well-suited to this kind of work?

What is it about my personality that makes me a good producer? Well, I think there are a lot of factors. I go back to my earliest days as being a kid who was playing in a band and trying to figure out how to make a recording for our band with other producers. I was always essentially looking for help to get inside of my own head and for someone to help me meet my potential with the help of their own experience and perspective and knowledge. I think that I carried that with me when eventually I was on the other side of things. I care about the artists I work with. I care about what's in their heart and what it is they're trying to express, whether it's from an aesthetic standpoint or from an emotional standpoint. I try to really work tirelessly until that is there. I think the evidence of that is just how many full albums and projects I've been a part of developing. That was more important to me than having any kind of trademark sound or something.

The other part of this job often just involves having patience. You have to practice patience because sometimes it takes a while to get where you want to go. It also really comes down to caring. I do believe that. And then the next part is just your basic skills and whether or not if you care to use your skill to the fullest and push yourself as far as you can go. If you're willing to do that, the odds are you going to do a good job, but that is measured differently for everybody. What is it to be good? What is it to do a good job? I think I've done a great job on a lot of records that haven't sold very many copies at all or not very many people have heard. And I think I've done the same caliber of work on records that have been much more popular. So, what is the measure of success? That's a personal question for everybody. For me, it is what it is and for the artist, it is what it is.

And as a producer, that's part of the conversation, too. What are you after? I'd like to help you try and figure that out and, hopefully, our interests are somewhat aligned. And if they're not, then in my heart of hearts I don't know if I'm the right person. That's fine, too. I almost feel like I would be cheating an artist to take a job I wasn't right for or if I weren't honest about my feelings. I would be just trying to get the job rather than knowing that I'm the right person for this job...and that doesn't make for good music.

I'm looking at your discography. You've made, at this point, so many different kinds of records with so many different kinds of people. Having the wherewithal to know when something is not the right fit or when maybe you aren't the right person for the job, that must be a hard but valuable thing.

Yeah. I wouldn't say I've walked away from things that I thought were a bad fit too often, but I've definitely not chased after things that I was not sure I would be right for. And then in other situations, I've been thrown into the room with people where I feel like, "What could I possibly do here?" In a very gratifying turn of events, I've always found that at the end of the day, making music is making music. And my instincts, and whatever knowledge I have gained up to this point, have worked for me in situations where I first thought I wouldn't be able to do it.

I don't know that I walked in to work with Usher, thinking "I know exactly what this guy needs." My way of coping with that anxiety was to brush up on the records that I used to listen to in high school, because all the girls in high school listened to Usher's *Confessions* and then I started to realize "Oh yeah. It'd be cool to do stuff like this again." But when I actually got in there to work I realized that if he wanted to do stuff like that again, he would just call the people who did that the first time around. And that even more to the point, he didn't want to do stuff like that again. Who wants to go back and do something they've done before? And so suddenly, I'm left with this very vulnerable feeling of "What can I actually add to the future of Usher's music?" And that's a lot of intellectualizing. Ultimately, we sat down and wrote a song.

And then from a producer standpoint, as things were coming along, I remember hearing his voice and thinking, "Wow, that sounds so special." Just purely based on my own experience, I have rarely, if ever, heard someone sing like that. And so I'm like, "Yeah, let's do that." And it's those little simple decisions that at the end of the day lead to a song. Oftentimes, that song never sees the light of day because it maybe wasn't good enough or somebody didn't like it, whatever it is. But in that case with Usher, it was a one of a kind situations where everything just clicked.

I recently spoke to a screenwriter who was talking about all the scripts he wrote for people that never actually got made. For a producer, that must be tough sometimes. You work on lots of things that may never be released. I assume you just have to let go of it and move on to the next thing.

Speaking from my own personal experience, I think if there was some sort of idea that came up in a writing/production session and the song didn't make it and the idea stays with me long enough, sometimes I find another scenario where it does make sense. I'm not the kind of producer who has a folder of tracks that I bring around with me. It's just not the way I generally make records. Sometimes that's what people need to make a record—you just start making some tracks on it—but other times it's just more of an abstract idea. I like the idea of these two elements. I love "Oh, that instrument sounded really cool. The song didn't come together, but maybe I'll find another song where that instrument would be right."

As a producer often your goal is to bring the best out in people. Maybe they have this half formed idea or this thing they want to say and you simply help them realize what that is.

That's exactly it. That's what it is—in whatever way, shape, or form. Maybe it is a conversation you have with someone and then you go create a song based around that conversation and produce it, or maybe there's already a song, the instruments are already there, and you're just trying to elevate it some way. Sometimes it's just telling someone that what they have is actually perfect. I think that's actually really valuable information. And really, I feel like production can be as little as that. I wish I had more of that. It would make my life easier. But sometimes that is the work.

As a producer, are there certain patterns you see over and over again—perhaps ways in which you see people getting in their own way, or certain stumbling blocks that a lot of artists typically face?

Helping someone get out of their own way is a really hard thing to do. Let's say you're working on a song and it's just not coming together. Maybe there's some grand idea for something, but in practice it's not materializing. That can mess with your confidence, depending on what part of the process you're at. So suddenly, you're fixated on getting this thing right because once you do, you'll feel like you've made it over this wall and you can just keep going. Sometimes what's most important is just to pause on that and continue to work on other new material, just start over and try to be fresh. Creating an environment that

keeps you fresh is a challenge and that's really what I always try to do with people.

Because the two things work against each other: staying fresh and then also being able to get something done. All the work that goes into finishing something can most certainly make you feel not fresh. But having sparking new ideas comes from feeling fresh. You can't really ever call when that is going to happen. It just happens. You just have to recognize it when it is happening. And it's a game of respect, too. There's oftentimes there's things that I don't see as being that strong that the artist sees and I have to follow their instincts until it's done. Usually by the time the song is out—if you have a good chemistry with people you're working with—there's a meeting of the minds where truly everyone believes in everything that's happened.

Looking back, for me the most important aspect of being a producer has been respecting the artists that I work with, caring about them, listening to what they say, and then also making sure that I have the time and energy to put forth everything that I have to say as well. Everybody is totally being heard, whether that means in a conversational way or in a musical way.

Do you have to at some point remove your ego from the process?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. 100%. I think that ego is important because you *should* have self-confidence, especially if you have a vision for something or an idea that's going to help get something to another place. But you can't get lost in any version of self-interest because at the end of the day, what's most important is that the artist has something that they believe in and that they can go on tour with and stand behind for the rest of their lives. That's first and foremost. In the best case scenario, you also feel the same way about the material.

You're really just trying to help the artists realize their vision. And it may or may not totally coincide with your vision, but so long as for large majority of the project your visions are connected, I think that makes for a good fit. And then the other part of it is just me respecting the artists and truly wanting to get this idea done for them.

I'm sure there have been cases where there was a song that I didn't understand at first and then it ended up being a big song for the artist, but I can't really think of one off the top of my head. I don't feel insecure about that. If that were to really happen, I'd feel happy that I stuck through it, despite the fact. This is hypothetical, but I would feel accomplished that I stuck through it despite the fact that I didn't fully understand it.

When do you feel like you're at your most creative?

My most creative...I don't know. There's so many different aspects to what I do, and they're all creatively fulfilling in their own ways, whether that be getting a great vocal performance out of someone or building a track from scratch that I actually love.

I think the thing is that I really enjoy collaboration. I'm fully capable of making music all by myself, but I'll never love it as much as something I do with somebody else. Sometimes the collaboration can be as little as just them singing on the track, and that to me is a huge collaboration because it really takes on a whole new energy and meaning when someone is delivering an amazing vocal over a track that you've made.

And then on the other side of things, just anything from conceptually saying, "Let's try switching the sound up, let's change the arrangement of the song. Let's do something different, let's do something unexpected." I feel the most creative when I'm making music that's unexpected, when it feels fresh and inspired and you're not just leaning on the building blocks that already exist.

What advice do you have for aspiring music producers?

I can only give advice from my perspective, obviously, but I'll say that if what you want to do with your life is making music, you just need to do it. And I don't think there's anything that you should allow to get in your way. Also, I think that you need to work with what you have, work with the people who are around you, work with yourself, whatever it is. Create the opportunity to make music for yourself.

Often I get "How do I get my music out there?" which is hard to answer. I think the more you can control your own fate, the better. And that has to do with expectations as well. What are your expectations? I think the expectation should just be to make music and nothing else. If the music is not paying your bills—and this is not something that people like to hear—then you have to find other ways to pay your bills until it *is* paying the bills. I never looked at music from a real business perspective. I look at it from a passion perspective and what I always wanted to do is to make music. I just made it for that reason.

You should just try and not allow "things" to control you. You can make music in a lot of different ways and you don't need much to do it. It doesn't take anything more than, in some cases, an iPhone. With a laptop and some simple software you can start to express yourself from a production standpoint. Everyone has a different situation. But at the root of it, people from all different kinds of backgrounds have managed to make and produce music. It's important to remember that. You can do it if you want to. And if you're good at it and if you work really hard, you can be successful. I'm not saying it's easy. It's not. Just try and remember that everything you do every step of the way is simply a learning lesson. It never stops being that way, no matter what. The same feelings you have when you start are feelings that follow

you forever. You can always be better.

Essential Ariel Rechtshaid Productions:

Adele - "When We Were Young" (2015)

Sky Ferreira - *Night Time, My Time* (2013)

HAIM - *Something to Tell You* (2017)

Carly Rae Jepsen - "All That" (2015)

Vampire Weekend - *Modern Vampires of the City* (2013)

Name

Ariel Rechtshaid

Vocation

Musician, Producer

Fact

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