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September 25, 2023 -

As told to J. Bennett, 3438 words.

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On following your instincts

Songwriter and lyricist Andrew Eldritch (The Sisters of Mercy) discusses taking responsibility for your career, willful creation, and having a Plan B.

What kind of advice do you have for aspiring artists?

The first thing to say is that you can aspire all you want. Only one percent of you will be working as opposed to just aspiring. So maybe you should learn some stuff that's more broadly useful. That's helped me a lot. I'm very fast with Photoshop, Illustrator, and I've learned some contract law. I can read a balance sheet if I have to.

In the early days of Sisters, did you have a Plan B?

Absolutely not.

You were determined to make it, then.

I had no expectation of making it whatsoever. In those days, any fool could make a record in a morning at a cheap studio, and if it was shambolic enough, John Peel would play it. We decided to test this theory. We didn't look beyond that. One of the reasons I'm good at doing this after a fashion is because I don't feel a need to adhere to common methods because I don't know what they are. A lot of people go to music school, and they can play Chopin—not in time, of course, because classical musicians cannot play in time. But their fingers naturally make Chopin shapes. I don't know what those are.

And that applies to the artwork, the way I approach the politics of the business—which is, as you know, cutthroat. And it applies to the way I treat my colleagues and the strangers that I encounter in the course of my work. I have my own set of rules—they work for me; may not work for you. Not everybody can learn contract law or read a balance sheet—or more to the point, not everybody can be bothered. Musicians are notorious for having a sense of entitlement without a sense of responsibility.

Did you ever feel that way?

I am not a musician.

You're a songwriter.

I've kind of become one in the same way that John Carpenter became one. He didn't sit down and learn Chopin. But he probably did sit down and learn how to splice celluloid—a useful skill.

When you were writing your early songs, did you find that they came easily or was it a struggle?

In 1982 or '83, I wrote a song called "Alice" in 10 minutes—words and music. And that changed my life because from then on, I was taking it seriously, and I did see a future in this. I can remember the feeling. All the hairs on my arms are standing up right now. These are magic moments in a person's life. I've had a few. And there was a Plan B—it was to keep doing Plan A. Now it's rare these days that I write anything in 10 minutes, but I'm still confident in my instincts and my cravings.

After "Alice," were you confident you could do it again?

Oh, I knew I could. But I didn't see it coming the first time. It wasn't ever my plan to make a Bruce

Springsteen record with Jimmy Iovine at the desk. My plan was to be the fool and then quickly disappear and be forced to do something else, which in my case—this is before computers—would’ve been working at the BBC or the diplomatic corps, or the dark diplomatic corps, which every major nation indulges in. My CV is designed to make me one of those three things.

How would you characterize your creative process?

Willful.

Meaning you have a goal in mind when you start?

No, but I persist in following my instincts and cravings, whatever they are at the time. Some of them seem to be consistent, some of them don’t. I am bloody minded enough to have survived through sheer bloody mindedness, I think. Also, there’s nothing else I want to do. I don’t feel the need to be a racing driver or to be in films. I don’t feel the need to write a novel, and I certainly don’t want a proper job. One’s popularity comes and goes in waves. Right now, we seem to be receiving a lot of love from particularly the hard rock and metal communities, but we’re also a pop band, and we’re this and we’re that. So the fact that I don’t want to do anything else, it’s not hurting me at the moment. But when it has hurt me, I’ve taken that pain.

Has your songwriting process changed over time?

It’s recently changed because I’ve been trying to sing fewer words per minute, and thus write fewer words per minute. I’m aware that I’ve written a lot of songs previously which worked on a guitar in the key that they were in with no regard to the key that I can sing in. And I use the word “singing” advisedly. So, I’m more aware of that. I’ve often felt onstage that I’d rather be the monkey than the organ grinder. When I’m writing, I’m the organ grinder. When I’m onstage, I prefer to just be the monkey.

Beyond that, the songwriting process hasn’t really changed. Sometimes I sit down with a guitar or a keyboard, and I just see what comes out. I throw 99 percent of it away because it is indeed rubbish, and I keep the stuff that I think is engaging or somehow compelling. I don’t sit down to write words—they either come to me or they don’t. I scribble them down, or these days log them, and I try and forget about them for a few weeks. If they’re still good in the cold light of day, then I go to work on them heavily. But in the first instance, they either come or they don’t. I don’t have writing hours—it’s not a task for me.

Do you keep a notebook of lyrical ideas?

Unfortunately, I keep so many that I can’t keep track of where they all are, and there’s no one repository. One of the places I live is more or less covered in Post-it notes. The other thing that’s recently changed in my writing is that I’ve decided to embrace the abuse of grammar which I used to occasionally indulge in. Now I’m indulging it a lot.

Why do you think that is?

Because it brings the listener up short. I wouldn’t say it begs for attention, but it certainly draws attention—and it’s playful, and it shows that I know enough about grammar to abuse it. So I’m having fun with that.

Do you write down lyric ideas as they come to you?

Yes, I try to. It’s very rare that I write down a phrase and immediately associate a melody with it. That comes later. I don’t know why that is. I think that’s why my riffs in particular stand up on their own, and the words stand up on their own, and sometimes the sum of the parts is bigger than you’d think. But only sometimes. It’s nice when that happens. I’m only speaking now, by the way, about songs where I’ve written the words and the music, because I think that’s what you are talking about also.

Yes, absolutely—although we’ll get to collaboration in a minute. Do you have a philosophical approach that you bring to writing songs? Are there things you always do, for example, or things you’ll never do?

I try not to write the same song over and over and over again, but there do seem to be common threads. I’m not afraid to wear my social politics and my heart on my sleeve. As far as creative philosophy, I just do what I’m able to do. These days, I’m able to do quite a lot because I’ve been doing it for a while now, and I have a better idea of how words and music and me fit together, so I can follow my instincts and my cravings. And right this minute—and to a lesser extent, but definitely to an extent—the band has been quite productive, so we’re not afraid to throw stuff in the garbage if it doesn’t meet our current standards. So, I can afford to follow my instincts and cravings because I don’t have to write six songs by the end of next week if I don’t think they’re good enough.

I read an old interview of yours in which you said, “I don’t make music for you, I make it for me.” I feel like that might not be true for many career musicians.

That’s certainly true of me now because I don’t have to do anything at all with myself. 20 years ago, my situation was different. I either did music or I had to get a proper job.

So, your ability to make music for you is directly related to financial stability.

Yes. As I've said, when things aren't going so well, I'll take that on the chin. But it's easier to take stuff on the chin when you're 25 than it is when you're 50. Luckily, I haven't had to face such issues for a long time. And my creative philosophy also includes not dealing with any record companies I don't want to deal with, which right now is still all of them. It means I can afford to follow my political instincts when I decide where to play.

These days, many bands or artists self-release their own music, and instantly everyone has access to it. Like you, they can circumvent the label process—even though some of them eventually do end up on a record label...

They can, but—either way—they're not going to make any money from it. So, they'd better have a lot of spare time, they'd better have the nervous energy and a bit of cash to invest in making that product, which will then be consumed by people for free.

What I was going to say is that you were a trailblazer in this regard. You stopped working with record companies—and even stopped making records—in the early '90s, long before the internet was widely available to consumers.

It was widely available to me. I'm an early adopter. But I know what you're saying. Yes, we could crowdfund—that's an option. For the last while, I'm busy doing other stuff, and the whole business of making records is moot. I'm busy. And I don't have to.

But you made this decision 30 years ago. At the time, did you have any moments of doubt?

I did warn the record company at the time, when I stopped doing business with them, that their attitude toward the internet would kill them. They belatedly adopted Spotify in an effort to restore their glorious malpractice. But when I stopped making records for Warner, they were still a quasi-functioning company. They weren't functioning for me, so I stopped working with them. But they were still working, they were still functioning for other entities. It wasn't till soon afterwards that the internet did indeed kill them. They walked into it.

That part of the industry is just not in a fit state to deal with. I recently agreed a deal with Universal. I thought everything was fine until they came back and said, "Ah, but we want three times the amount of product you thought you were agreeing to." They just can't stop themselves being stupid.

Earlier, you made a self-deprecating remark about your singing voice. Were you not confident about that when you started? How did that develop over time?

I've learnt better to mask my inadequacies. Bob Dylan can't really sing. Doesn't matter. He learned to be very good at being Bob Dylan.

We've been talking about songs that you write by yourself. What do you view as the pros and cons of collaboration?

I'm happy to collaborate. I do think it's nice when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Everybody wants to be part of something that's bigger than they are, better than they are. Having said that, other people are difficult, aren't they? It might be for reasons to do with their personality, their other obligations, their instincts and cravings—which they are entitled to. It might be because on a technical level, you can't connect. I work with one person at the moment who's spent more than a decade refusing to install the operating system that I use when I'm working on music. It's a very strange and arcane system called Windows. We may start collaborating properly if the person in question learns to operate this system. We shall see.

How do you deal with writer's block? Do you find it's better to plow ahead and force a conclusion or just walk away for an unspecified amount of time?

Oh, I could happily ignore it for 10 years. There's a lot of films to watch, there's a lot of books to read. I do value my own persistence, but it does manifest itself more in bloody mindedness than productivity. I was lucky enough to sell a lot of records when I was making them, so if I don't feel like making a record or if I feel that the time, nervous energy, and cash involved in making it would be squandered—and if the industry is in such a state that releasing it would be more of a pain than a blessing—then I won't make that record because I don't have to.

I understand it's a shame for other people who want that recording, but I've heard it in my head. Sometimes I've played it live, although that's a different medium entirely, but it does remind me how it sounds in my head, so I'm good. This sounds very selfish, but actually, I do work quite hard when I work. I spent nine months on the road last year. We're going to be nine months on the road this year.

How has your attitude toward performing changed over the years?

It hasn't, really. I do what I can. At the beginning, that was not very much. My onstage terror manifested itself in stasis and catatonia. Now, I can pretend to be an extrovert.

Do you still get stage fright?

Yes. One of the reasons I'm good at doing this after my fashion is that I'm not very good at it, so I have an individual appeal.

That's basically what you said about writing songs, too. You didn't go to music school; you don't have classical training. I'm a big fan of this philosophy too, at least when it comes to creativity—the idea that formal training fucks you up in a lot of ways.

Yes. Unfortunately, one picks stuff up. I couldn't tell you what key a song is in, unless it's one of mine, in which case it's always in A. But I can tell you when a key changes, and I know whether it's up or down. That's all I need to know. I listened to a lot of records when I was younger, and I have a very well-developed sense of pop structures—how to do them, and also how to avoid them when required. I think if your instincts are good, you don't need that much musicology to translate those ideas into reality. God forbid you end up like Yngwie Malmsteen.

I never expected to hear that name pass your lips.

Exactly. He's going to send people after me now.

Let's flip that idea on its head a little bit, then. I know you studied at prestigious universities—Oxford, for instance. Did that experience inform your artistic pursuits in any way?

I was built to go to Oxford. I was academically gifted, and then I made myself a little bit more academically gifted. So I deserved to be there, and I'm aware that I have that quality. I'm not saying it's a good quality or a bad quality, I'm just saying it's a quality. However, I hated Oxford. In the '70s, it was very class ridden still. I didn't have any money, so I couldn't have the kind of good time that the upper middle classes were having. My life was cold, damp. I hadn't realized just how much I would suffer from antiquated French courses and antiquated German courses, because my thing was postwar literature.

I hated Oxford, so I quit. And then I went to Leeds, which was an eye opener. All I knew about the north, despite half my family having originally come from there, was from a rather camp soap opera. I liked the reality when I found it, and right now I'm still talking to you from a building in Leeds. That very much informed my contempt for the upper middle classes, my postwar attitude—although I'm a big fan of German Expressionism from the '20s, and Shakespeare. And I was happy to become a committed punk rocker of the second wave, for good or bad—for better, for poorer. Sorry, how's it go? I've never been married. I don't have a mortgage either, by the way.

I think we should be talking to you about financial planning. It seems like you've put yourself in a good position, where so many artists have not. They've pissed away whatever money they've earned—or mismanaged it.

Even before I was in a band, I watched a friend of a friend sign up to an independent label, make two singles, have a pop career that lasted a year, and came out of it not even with his own guitar. Nothing. And shortly thereafter, Cherry Red Publishing offered me an advance of four pounds to sign up with them. Not 4,000 pounds, not four million pounds—four pounds. And in those days, there were people who would do that. At that time, I had no respect for myself as a musician, but I had self-respect as a person.

At the top of this conversation, you said you've never felt like writing a novel, but what about a memoir?

I would feel like writing a novel if I wasn't so intimidated by all the great books that I've read and continue to read. I like fiction, I think I'm good at it. But I think I'm more noticeably good in the field that I'm in than I would be in the field of novel writing, which incidentally is another thankless task. Ill rewarded and ill regarded.

But a memoir? No. If I've got anything to say about past or current band politics, I've got a website. There's enough on there already, and I haven't added to it for ages. I don't feel the need. Forgive me saying this to an interviewer, but I don't feel that autobiographical details are of any relevance to the product. My product is not autobiography or being famous. If I'm good for anything, it's the songs. If they don't stand up on their own, I should stop writing them.

Andrew Eldritch Recommends:

I'm having a great time with the Slough House series of spy thrillers by Mick Herron. The writing is exceptional. I don't normally read spy thrillers, but these books aren't about spies and thrills. They are about how well Mick Herron can write and how much fun he's having doing it, and how much fun I'm having reading it.

Before that, I read all the books by Ian McDonald. He writes science fiction, which is more my home ground. And I loved all of them apart from *Desolation Road*, which goes off the rails two thirds of the way through and never gets back on them despite being set next to a railway track.

Before that, I read all the books by Mr. Hugh Howey. Again, science fiction. And I enjoyed them very much.

I'm a big fan of China Miéville. I heartily recommend *The City & The City*. It's short. Everybody can get through that. And I had massive fun with his book *Kraken*, which charmingly, owes an awful lot to Lovecraft. But it's a romp.

For number five, I'm going to put in a mention for what I think is the best film of recent years, which is called Bunraku. It's not my favorite film because Rollerball, the Norman Jewison version, is still my favorite film. I watch it regularly. But Bunraku is the best film of recent years. If you have any love for the 1966 Batman TV series and if you think that Marvel is doing a terrible job of comic book films- which they are- this film is for you.

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