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As told to Grayson Haver Currin, 2036 words.

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# On criticizing your scene and respecting your limits

**Vocalist Bryan Funck of Thou on DIY creative motivations, pushing back against the typical metal band tropes, and having a realistic understanding of what you're capable of.**

**One of my favorite Thou stories is how you joined the band—essentially, you were honest with everyone else, said you didn't really like the vocals, and that they should let you do it instead. You were right, turns out, and now this has become a big part of your life. Has that lesson stuck with you?**

That was a very profound lesson: "Yeah, we should just go for it. We should just try it." That came up years later, too, when we started talking to other bands about doing stuff, including other musicians on records or approaching this or that label. If we dream something up, we just start asking and see what happens.

Even when we first started touring, I would always try to get certain bands that I liked in certain towns to play with us. A lot of times, they don't have time. Nine out of 10 times—maybe 9.9 out of 10 times—we don't get to play with a lot of bands we're asking. We're at the height of our "power" right now as far as clout, but we still get rejected. That's how things worked out with Sacred Bones. That's how things worked out with us collaborating with The Body and doing all sorts of stuff. Other people act like it's outside their means or something, but maybe it's because they're just not asking.

**How has that played out with Thou itself?**

With Thou, there's always this impetus to want to give back. Especially because people have helped us a lot along the way. Even if it's just screening shirts for us, or helping us fold some records, or whatever, people have gone out of their way for us in a big way all these years. There's always this sense of duty to pay it forward. I wasn't raised Catholic, per se, but I went to Catholic school all my life. There's a weird Christian ethic of always wanting to help people along.

**Most people might look at that scenario and see it as a punk ethic, rather than a Christian one. Are they connected for you?**

Punk, for me, is a love/hate thing. There's been an impetus in my life to react to the punk scene not being what I want it to be and being more directed by business ethics. I've always had this desire to bludgeon it into what I would like it to be, the DIY scene that I want. With my vision or standards, that's not going to happen, so there's a constant feeling of frustration and failure. Because I have Thou and other things that are within my control, I've been able to pull back a lot and not worry as much about how other people are approaching this and that. I'm happy with how I deal with things, and I'm happy about refining that as time goes by. But I don't know if I'm necessarily satisfied with the community in general.

**How do you see Thou within the larger metal ecosphere?**

I'm constantly looking for ways that we can do a metal band that's not the way everybody else is doing metal bands. I see the same thing over and over again, and that's boring. I don't care: I don't need to see another record with skulls or some nature scene or whatever. I'm always looking for ways of getting to a certain feeling or certain idea that I think some other metal band wouldn't necessarily look for. Whatever the prevailing order is, there's this desire to knock that over or just fuck with people a little bit, to do something that's going to be a bit of an irritant.

**What if you could play god with, say, 100 acres and build a creative community to your liking. What would it look like?**

Modern but environmentally sustainable. All the conveniences, but probably somewhere in the middle of nature, surrounded by people that are hyper-creative and creatively challenging. People that have a strong, strong work ethic. All the typical punk things: some kind of space for shows, some kind of space for art. Lots of big, open, relaxing places and little nooks. Lots of books. Living spaces that are near but also secluded. Some communal spaces. It would be a very typical punk thing but real nice, clean, and very modern. That'd probably weed out a lot of people, the cleanliness factor.

**What you're describing doesn't sound very much like New Orleans.**

I was thinking about this the other day: *god, why am I still here? Why am I in this town?* I think it's knowing everybody. New Orleans is funny because it's more like a small town than it is a city. Everybody knows everybody. It's not very cool. Like any kind of trendy stuff that's happening in other places, New Orleans is usually at least like three-to-five years behind the times. I know where everything is. The intimate knowledge of this street or that street or that subdivision: it feels comfortable being down here.

**Does knowing the landscape in that way make it easier to survive for you, so that you have more time and energy to devote to what you make and your ideas? Thou is known for being prolific, after all.**

I feel like people down here are notorious for being very lazy, very indifferent, very short-sighted. There's this huge emphasis on the party social culture. The thing that motivated us to work was just getting out of the city so much, seeing other places, having to be with each other every day and be working on the same thing every day. And then getting offers to do stuff—bands wanting to do a split, some label wanting to put out a record. That was big. Anytime somebody would ask us to do something, we were saying yes. We had to work through it together, and it was lucky that all the people in the band have something that all people, especially down here, don't quite have: that work ethic.

**You're saying that part of what propelled you was the realization that you truly need to do it yourself, if you wanted to see it at all in your city?**

That's how I got into doing shows. A lot of the bands I wanted to see just weren't coming down here because nobody was really looking to book them. So, I was like, "Look, I'll do it. I want to see your band. Come play down here. I'll get it all sorted out."

When I lived in Oakland, I didn't have to do anything. I could just go to a show and enjoy it. But being here, if you want things to happen, it's necessary for you to make those things happen. In Oakland, it was cool to be a punk or be in some subgenre of something. Drill it down however deep you want, and there's 800 other people that are only into that one thing also. It was a nice sabbatical for me. Here, you don't really have that. If you want to have shows, it's either going to be in some shitty dive bar outside of the club scene, or a house show or an art gallery or puppet theater or a recycling warehouse. We've done stuff in a boxing gym. Those kinds of random venues speak more to me about punk and DIY than some huge club or CBGB.

**You've always been very insistent that you're not a musician and that you're barely a singer. Is that kind of self-awareness and even self-deprecation useful for you? Does it propel you?**

It makes things more difficult. This is probably me projecting, but musically my opinion is taken with a grain of salt a lot. I had absolutely no training and very little background outside of punk bands. If I'm coming up with an idea and saying, "Oh, we need to change this. We need to make this like that," my way is very nontechnical: "This part needs to be sadder. This part can't be so limp dick." My way may not always be the most helpful way for the actual musicians. So, there's some trouble trying to translate some of that stuff. When I'm writing a song, my sense of things is just how it sounds, how it feels. I don't know how helpful that is, but the members of Thou have gotten a lot better over the years at being able to translate that.

**When people ask you what you do, what do you generally say?**

I say I'm a singer, but usually, I'll put it in quotes and then I'll laugh and say, "if you want to call it singing." Part of it is a lack of skill. I can do one thing, and that's the thing that I do. I don't know if I would necessarily want to change that very much. The times where we have music that requires something else, either I step up, or we find somebody that can do that thing.

**One remarkable thing about *Magus* is that it feels politically timely, but it doesn't feel politically obvious. The questions you raise are complex and don't have straightforward answers. How do you see yourself as a writer responding to the world around you right now?**

*Magus* has a lot of stuff that's in the zeitgeist of social politics right now. But it's more by virtue of those are things I'm dealing with in my life with people that I know. Any song that might seem like it has a broader social commentary is probably written about a very specific person or instance in my life. I've been talking about this shit with people for 20 years. I'm a punk, you know? A lot of the stuff like this isn't new to me.

I write a certain way because I know I *can* write songs in that way and feel good about them, I can't really write stuff that's straightforward and good. I wish I could. Somebody like Sam McPheeters from Born Against could write about a political thing where you know what he is saying, but it is also very witty and insightful and interesting. Maybe that's something I need to work on. We have recently talked about doing a record that is a little clearer about our politics. We've had too many wash-ups with people who we are diametrically opposed to, reading things into our music that aren't there, that are very *much* not there. There has been some chatter about trying to write something that's unmistakable.

But no matter what I write about or what I start to write about, I always find a way to turn the lens inward. Even if I'm writing about a person who maybe wronged me, it's more interesting and probably more honest to write about it in terms of how I feel like I did wrong, what I could've done better. I don't

want to like proselytize too much with Thou, but I'm going to write about the stuff I'm dealing with. That's the fodder.

**You seem to be very aware of your own limits, whether it's understanding the mode and mood of your city or scene, or understanding that you'll probably never talk about much musical theory with your band. Do you consider that a strength of yours, understanding what you can and can't do?**

I feel like I've always been pretty self-critical and willing to address my faults as an artist and in a more personal sense, too. I don't know if everybody else in my life would agree with that. But, for me, it comes down to a more practical sense: if you have a limited amount of resources, you have to figure out how to do this thing you want to do with those resources.

Five things that inspire Bryan Funck right now:

Ellen Jane Rogers

Emma Ruth Rundle

Thomas Ligotti

Ryan Holiday

Ragana

Name

Bryan Funck

Vocation

Musician


Fact


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Photo credit: Craig Mulcahy

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