

# Ty Segall on throwing all your old ideas out the window



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2779 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [First attempts](#), [Independence](#).

**Your most recent album is stylistically all over the place, which is the opposite of what most artists will say about their records.**

It's definitely the point of the record. I'd say that the theme is the anti-theme, and the idea is to be free, hence the name *Freedom's Goblin*. I have made a lot of records that have had specific restrictions and confinements in the concept, but for this record the idea was that no idea is inappropriate, no space where we're going to record or create is wrong. The more far out, and the more free we get, the better things are.

**Unlimited freedom sounds liberating, but even that can become its own kind of trap. When your options are totally unlimited, sometimes making a creative decision becomes even harder.**

I don't know if that was an issue for me, but there were times where letting myself do something differently was very difficult. To be honest it forced me to face my insecurity, abandoning parts of my musical world where I feel comfortable and then doing things I feel that I'm not very good at. Those were the exciting parts in the end, but it was frightening. I wrote a song on the piano, and I forced myself to finish it. It ended up being one of my favorite ones on the record. Forcing myself to just sing on a song-not play any instruments, just sing-I've never done that on one of my records before. Stuff like that that was weird, but fun.

**There's something to be said for artists who have a specific aesthetic and mine one particular vibe, but there's also something admirable about throwing everything out the window and experimenting with things that make you uncomfortable or with things that, admittedly, maybe you aren't the best at.**

Totally. That's kind of where I want to go. From here on out I feel like the guitar-based song writing, rock songwriting, it's too comfortable now, so I don't want to go there anymore. I don't know what that means for my future. Maybe I'll do some *Metal Machine Music* or something? Sometimes you gotta throw all your old ideas out the window and do something new.

**How many different kinds of instruments can you play?**

I really can't play that many, and actually my next idea is to tackle that. I can just play guitars and bass, some synth stuff, very rudimentary piano, and drums. I think I'm more of a drummer than anything else, and that's it. My next idea is to make a record only using instruments I don't know how to play. I feel like the ideas will still be there, the song structures, the same intuition, but the execution will be totally far out and weird. That excites me.

**You've made a lot of records within the general milieu of rock music, but do you find that your approach to thinking about songs, or how songs work, has changed over the years?**

I feel like the things that excite me about songs now are different than the things that originally did. It's all about the feel and instrumentation and rudimentary ideas, but if you wanted to you could take a song and reform them in numerous ways. For example, on this record the band was in the studio and I played them the chords once, and that was the first take. That was the experiment. That excites me, because it's like the band doesn't know exactly what's going on. But when you're listening, especially repeat listens, you can pick up on these weird nuances. It's harsh to do that to your band, to not show them the music until you're basically recording it, but it's interesting as a listener.

**That is an interesting conundrum for recording artists-the difference between people who are exacting in an obsessive way where it's like, "No, play it again and again until it's perfect" or people who are the opposite of that. For some, the recording is just a document of a time and place that doesn't need to be perfect, where for others the idea of an album is wrapped up in perfection, making these the most perfect versions of the songs imaginable.**

I actually love both of those approaches. They're held equally in my appreciation. I think there's a time and a place for me for both of those ways of thinking. However, I don't think I've ever been a super perfectionist... although I want to. An album like *Forever Changes* is a great example of why you should aspire to be perfect, but then there are those [Syd Barrett](#) records which kind of illustrate why you should just go in there and be a freak and it will be great. I'm more in that camp, I think.

**There's a fine line between like loving the thing you make in a very particular way but also not being overly precious about it.**

That is fundamentally my whole thing. That's one thing I've learned over the years the hard way. If you're overly precious about something you'll kill it. Also, the meaning of things doesn't stop after you make it, the meaning continues on forever, so if you have an open mind in that sense, too, it'll be better. I think records are better if you hold your cards a little farther away from your chest.

**Are you someone who's always working on music? People definitely think of you as being prolific.**

Yes, but not always on my own music. I'll either be engineering music for another band, or playing in another band. I actually take a lot of breaks from my own music. I agree with you about the prolific thing, but I don't really see it as this insane thing. To me collaborating with people shouldn't even count, because there's multiple brains making a record, it's not just me.

**Working with other bands as an engineer must potentially be an educational process-a glimpse into the way someone else works.**

It's one of the most rewarding things I do...and it can also be a total nightmare if you get into a project and the communication is somehow off. Just like with anything. But generally it's so much fun. It's great to be in a studio and to witness other people's process. I enjoy being just being the hands that someone else wants me to be. There are projects where I just hit record, or I just mix it, and I'm out. It's really fun because then I get to focus on pure sound, and method, the actual craft of recording things, and EQing, and mixing. Mixing is maybe my favorite thing. I feel like mixing is an instrument of its own. I feel just as strong about mixing something as I do about writing a song. To me they are deeply connected to the point where you can't separate them. I have to mix all my own stuff, or at least be in there dictating moves while someone else does it.

**For some people hearing their own old records is painful; all they can hear is what they would have done differently now. What is your relationship to your back catalog?**

All over the place. There's a couple records that I really do like. I'm proud of them. But for the most part, I'm not happy with most of them. There's always something to change. Mostly I appreciate them for what they are, which is cool, but the really early stuff I fucking hate. I really do. I can't stand it. I appreciate some of the tunes on them, but most of it sounds so stylized to me.

There's a really amazing realization you have when you find your own voice, in any aspect, and you accept it and enjoy it, simply because it's your voice. I can remember being in my late teens, early 20s trying to write some super meaningful deep shit that just wasn't me. I see that now. These days I know how my brain works, I know my perspective now, I know my voice. Still, I'm still very insecure about lyrics, all the time. I think it's good to be though. You should be really critical about them because they are important.

**What is the songwriting process usually like for you?**

The best version of it is the total stream of consciousness, no filter version. Whether it's just sounds and noises, or maybe random words that I later pick through, or I just strum and sing words. That's the best version for me. Then I go through and I tweak stuff. Sitting down and trying to write words before music has never worked for me. The words need to sound good when I sing them and it's like I can only write them by singing them. It's weird. I've had this discussion with a lot of my songwriter friends where a lot of them are like, "I think that's one of your best traits, because you know what sounds good." I'm like, "Yeah, but then I can't always say what I want to say. Sometimes the words I want to say just don't sound right in a song." It's this weird thing where you have to find the middle ground.

**It has to be a marriage of music and words.**

I really look up to more free form lyricists that can make that shit work, and I really try to do that, and that's the hardest thing. It's almost impossible. That's why I like to have open ended ideas, or open ended themes, to be a bit more abstract or obtuse. I love the universal idea of a song that can be interpreted a ton of different ways. Those kind of songs from other artists mean the most to me, because I have my own definition of what that song is about.

**When you're working on something that feels off or is frustrating you, are you someone who will work at it forever or just abandon it?**

My style is to always finish it. I feel like if you're stagnant, or if you're stuck on something that doesn't feel right, you should just record a version of it and then you're done. Then maybe in a year come back and listen to it again. Maybe you'll be like, "Oh this is cool, I'll take that chorus to this other thing I'm working on and add it to this." Never beat it to death. For me, that is just the death of a song.

**How do you know when something just isn't working?**

That's why I have to finish everything, because I'll never know until it's done. Never. I don't have that skill. I have to try and finish every song. It just has to be done, and then later I'll listen to it and be like, "Oh, it's actually good", or, "Oh, this is dog shit" and throw it away.

**What is the best education for young musicians? Is it just listen to a million different kinds of records?**

I think it's that and playing. Just playing... and playing and playing. Also, I'm a fan of the ignorant musician, the unskilled musician. They're just visceral and free. Some of my favorite records are really messy and all over the place and I think there is beauty in everything. Have you heard that [Skip Spence record Oar](#), he's obviously a very skilled, talented writer, but he's also totally out of it. That makes it a beautiful record. [The Shaggs](#), too.

There's so many ways you can go with it. I do feel like with music and songwriting if you are too schooled, it'll be boring. The music will be too "pro" and it won't have it's own voice. It's a weird balance to try to maintain your craft and get better at certain things, but not lose your voice in the process. It's a weird one. I think you just have to focus on what you want to, follow your natural interests, and not worry about being perfect. That's good advice for anybody.

**What do you tell young musicians who solicit your advice?**

They don't really ask me that much. Not really. I get a lot of questions about engineering stuff. It's funny, it's almost never a technical question or a "how do you do this?" Instead it's like, "I want it to sound like The Beatles." It's like all right man, go for it. I don't know what to tell you.

**You often play in other bands, or played with other people outside the context of your own projects.**

To me that is some of the most rewarding stuff. Collaboration is arguably the best thing in the world. There's a really amazing element of freedom. The preciousness that you feel when you're making stuff just for yourself is almost always removed. Collaborating is like making chemicals or something. You're just constantly adding different ingredients with these different people. You're always coming up with something new or slightly different. Sometimes it explodes, sometimes it does nothing, but it's always interesting. It's also fun to go on our and just play in someone else's band. It's a nice break from your own thing. The stress level is way lower and it reminds you about why you just love to play music with people. It's all about having fun, which is what it should be, you know?

**What are your unrealized creative ambitions? Do you have any?**

I have a lot. Most of them are far-out things that I don't know if I'll ever do. It'd be insane to do a vocal record-only vocals, no instruments. It probably wouldn't sound good at all, but it'd be fun to try. I also want to make a record on a ship that sails across the Atlantic, but again you'd probably hear the boat on it and it'd sound bad. There's a lot of ideas that sound cool on paper that probably wouldn't yield a good record, but they would yield a cool experience... which to me is just as important. You gotta live. You gotta try some wild shit and see what happens.

**Ty Segall Recommends**

I know it's kind of bleak but I keep coming back to [Camus](#) and the existentialist writers. It's interesting because if you look at it from a humanitarian perspective it actually helps, especially in such a negative world. Theologically or philosophically I've always considered myself like a positive existentialist. My opinion is that there is nothing after we die and it's all over, but that's why you should treat everybody as best as you can right now. So I like these weirdly positive doomsday books. They are strangely heart-warming for me.

Everybody should get a dog. I think the number one thing that's helped me in my life, fully and completely, in the past couple years has been becoming a dog dad. A hundred percent. I also have a cat, Bug. I think pets in general are good for you. It's insane, even with just the normal everyday things I do, I think of them differently now because of my dog.

I think everybody should take themselves out for dinner more often. Just do it. Don't worry about the money. Have a nice meal. That's it. Also, maybe care less about money in general. It doesn't fucking matter. You should be pragmatic and stuff, but shit. I think going out to dinner with your friends more often, or making dinner for people, is something that is just really good for your heart.

Listen to The Beatles more. I've been really jamming [Let It Be](#) lately. That record is so good, I think.

Instead of looking at art, you should just draw more. Even if it's not what you think it's gonna be, it'll be a fun thing to do. We should make art that's less precious and more fun. It's nice. I only started getting really into drawing and painting a couple years ago. I had that attitude where I was like, "No, man. My drawings are crude and stupid, bad comic book shit and you don't want that." Once I got over that, it's been really, really fun and really, really nice for my mind. I love it when my friends draw or paint and I get to see that side of them.

Name

Ty Segall

Vocation

Musician

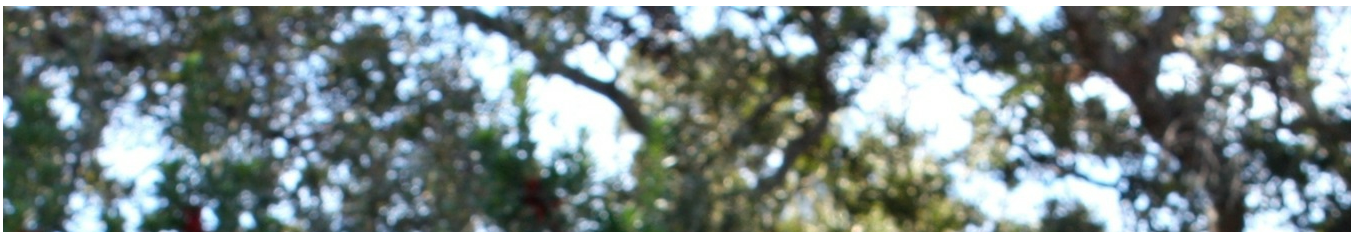




Photo by Denée Segall