

Creating Music | BY AARON BEAUMONT

I am a musician and I work with a lot of musicians, but I've also spent a lot of time working with self-described "non-musicians" or "non-creators" and it's really exciting to see the amateur or the hobbyist engage with and awaken to new forms of expression. What is especially fascinating to me is that at the very beginning of the process—and I'm taking this anecdotally from dozens of former piano students of all ages—when I innocently float the idea of playing something other than what's written on the page, something of their own invention, there's this reflexive dissonance for them, and usually a little terror. The verbatim response, ten times out of ten, not kidding, is, "Oh, I don't write music, I'm not a writer, I'm not the kind of person who writes songs." I usually respond with agreement—Yes, you're exactly right, you're not a writer, but that's simply because, literally, you don't write.

What I noticed in this weird urge to resist defining or identifying themselves as creators or the "creative type" was a tendency to think and speak of creativity in binary terms—on or off, black or white, very objective, like you would talk about any other physical or demographic feature you'd put on a driver's license: male, brown hair, Caucasian, six-feet, American, creator.

There's a mythology built up around the cult of "creators"—this idea that creativity is an inexorable, irrepressible, uneditable or irresistible, almost inhuman urge, possessed by the few "true" creators. David Byrne of Talking Heads paints a nice image of this in his fantastic book, *How Music Works*:

The accepted narrative suggests that a classical composer gets a strange look in his or her eye and begins furiously scribbling a fully realized composition that couldn't exist in any other form. Or that the rock-and-roll singer is driven by desire and demons, and out bursts this amazing, perfectly shaped song that had to be three



Jennifer Knapp performs
at the 2015 *Spectrum*
Ultraviolet Arts Festival.



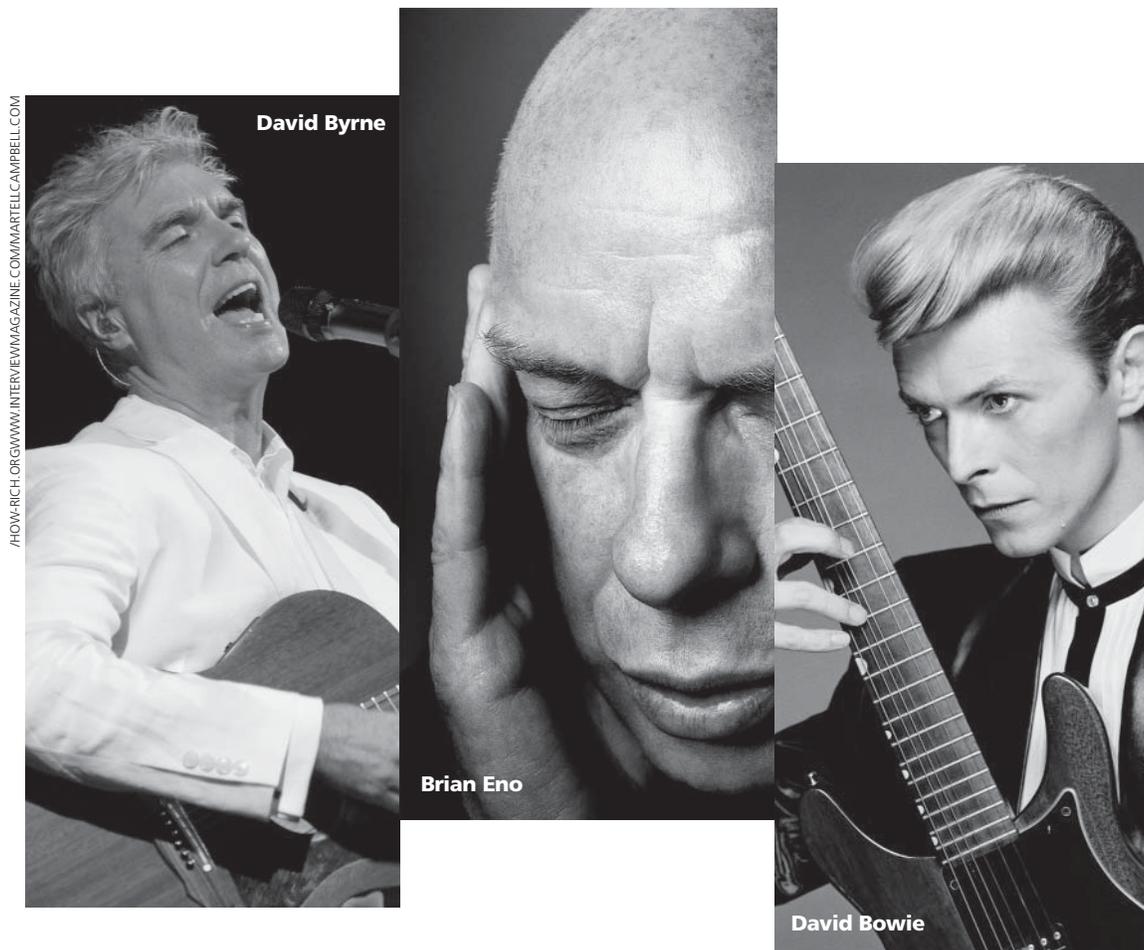
PHOTO BY JARED WRIGHT

minutes and twelve seconds—nothing more, nothing less. This is the romantic notion of how creative work comes to be, but I think the path of creation is almost 180° from this model.

That's a bold assertion from a creator with very few peers, and we're going to dig into what David Byrne might mean by this other vision of the creative process. We'll look at why this mythology of the wild-eyed creator exists,

on the control, laying creative waste, like napalm, on all in his path? To answer this, let's get back to those piano students for a minute. What's interesting to me is that I can't imagine getting the same knee-jerk reaction, ten times out of ten, the first time someone floated the idea of, say, playing baseball—this reaction that they're somehow automatically not qualified. Once they've actually given baseball a shot, of course, the totally reasonable response will be—

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and explore the relationship between seemingly opposing forces in the creative process—the tension between raw origination and refined organization. We're also going to explore what exactly we mean by organization, and look at some specific examples of this within the music-making context.

So where does this meme of the wild-eyed creator come from, heavy on the chaos, light

rock hard projectiles flying directly at my face terrify me to no end, please make it stop, for the love of God, no, no it hurts. I suspect that at least initially, a higher percentage of these students could at least conceive of existing in the same plane with baseball. This difference makes some sense—the abilities required by baseball are more apparent, mechanical, and maybe approachable on some level; the “stuff” of art—its mate-

rials and its inputs—seems very different, which helps account for the often mythical, cultic terms we ascribe to its creation.

So what is the “stuff” of art and the creative process? Neurobiologists and psychologists have been studying this question for decades. One popular conception splits creativity into two processes, seemingly diametrically opposed. First, we have the one that perpetuates the aforementioned myth—the restless, explosive, manic phase, generating huge amounts of content, purging the unrefined raw materials of art, grabbing onto disparate ideas and forging original connections between them. Second, we have the less flashy, less sexy responsible older cousin, who’s in charge of organizing, refining, tidying up after, creating order and coherence. Interestingly, we actually get an example of these two forces in the Biblical account of creation: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters.” Then the organizing force gets busy—God goes about separating the light from the darkness, the earth from heaven, day from night, the water from land, sifting and sorting, and so on and so forth.

So we have two forces in the creative process, and one of them tends to get a lot of attention—indeed, it seems to have completely dominated the conversation and fueled the cult of mystery around the creator, brought to the fore the otherworldly aspect of creativity.

Now don’t get me wrong—the mysteries of creativity, inspiration, and origination should be acknowledged and celebrated, and regarded with some reverence. You might say it is mystery itself after all—the very act of questioning—that produces art in the first place.

However, as we venerate the numinous, unexplainable aspects of creativity, the rest of the equation—the organization of it, the machinery of creativity, the accountant toiling away in a dim cubicle in the basement trying to make sense of the raw data—that stuff often gets short shrift. It doesn’t fit with our narrative of the Great Man. Of course Hemingway and Ravel wrote what they wrote—they were simply monumental geniuses touched by the gods, full stop. The fact that they *also* woke up at five a.m. every day and got to work writing is less convenient to us. I would propose, however, that *this* aspect of Hemingway’s life—the rules, structures, and limitations—actually precedes and lays the groundwork for cre-

ative discovery and origination. Hemingway, despite a sometimes unhinged personal life, was extremely serious and ruthless about his practice of creativity. I would contend that the creative process in all its mysterious “trappings,” not only does *not* resist organization—it actually thrives on it and requires it. The decisions, and the decision-making apparatus we use allow us to both produce and navigate with intention an otherwise overwhelming, limitless array of creative outcomes and possibilities.

Most importantly, and central to all this, is this idea—which is my answer to the theme of the day here, what gives me hope—that creativity itself is a skill anyone can practice and get better at. What’s more, when developed and maintained, sustainable creative practices will themselves become the seeds of creation and discovery.

I would suggest that the “mechanics” of creativity are no less identifiable and approachable than the mechanics of baseball, and in my opinion, they are also far, *far* more pleasant. Sorry baseball fans, I love you too. I just love vintage keyboards more.

I’ll clarify that I’m not trying to demystify art or the creative process or reduce it into something merely formulaic.

It’s also useful to clarify that by becoming a better “creator” I’m not referring to becoming a better “technician”—learning more scales on the piano is not the same as practicing my technique. Rather, it is learning to use technical skill creatively—as a source of inspiration and creative output.

So let’s look more closely at the “organizing” force in creativity—in the most general terms, we’re referring to a concept, rule, tool, method, or especially, a limiting factor by which the raw creative material is refined and can cohere.

One way of thinking about this is to liken it to the field of sound production. We have this raw material—a sound wave—but what gives it its artistic properties (its “value” in a sense), is the limitations around it, its physical environment, its collisions with the reflective surfaces, the box in which the raw material is contained and amplified.

It’s only through the process of this wild, untamable thing completely filling whatever vessel it’s in, checking all the exits, trying to escape—that the raw materials take on the qualities by which we come to identify it. In other words, it’s the things around it—the limiting features—that turn it into something interesting and beautiful. In the same way, creativity is at its best when the

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inscrutable, wild-eyed, untamable impulse is encouraged to interact with the impulse for order, organization, and coherence. I believe they not only play for the same team, but that the controls or limitations themselves can create, can issue forth the stuff of creativity—the materials themselves.

To dig into this idea lets turn to another favorite creator, Brian Eno, and his gardening-versus-architecture paradigm of creativity. In a

system to take you in the direction you want to go.' And this became my sort of motto for how I wanted composition to be.... To be able to surrender is to be able to know when to stop trying to control. And to know when to go with things, to be taken along by them." Eno advocates giving yourself regular opportunities to surrender to new creative mechanisms, to discover through them, to let them lead you.

In this view, our job as artists is almost more



brilliant lecture “Composers as Gardeners,” he talks about the extent to which a creator can presume to control his art, and advocates a bottom-up form of creative organization, rather than top-down—more like a gardener, cultivating hopeful creative seeds, less like the all-seeing architect, looking down with the master plan. He explains, “you organize it only somewhat and you then rely on the dynamics of the

curatorial—to build or select a creative mechanism to whose outcome we surrender, to cultivate the soil for discovery, for fruitfulness, for abundant supplies of ideas to which we can then apply our craftsmanship, and perspiration, and analytical lens. The tools, or limitations, themselves become the wellspring of creative output and inspiration.

These tools can take the form of anything we

surrender creative control to, anything that plays a decisive role in the creative output. One simple example: a piano is a tool and a limitation—it is not a flute; it is not a Moog synthesizer—I have two hands and ten fingers to play it, and I can stretch the definition of what playing a piano means; but in the end, I remain limited by its piano-ness. In this way, it is a simple creative organizing concept, and the conscious decision to use a piano will birth a specific and, by nature, uniquely organized creative output. To say it another way, if I sat down at a piano, I would write a very different song than if I picked up a guitar.

David Bowie mentions a more extreme breed of limiting mechanism he used to write lyrics:

You write down a paragraph or two describing several different subjects creating a kind of story ingredients-list, I suppose, and then cut the sentences into four or five-word sections; mix 'em up and reconnect them. You can get some pretty interesting idea combinations like this. You can use them as is or, if you have a craven need to not lose control, bounce off these ideas and write whole new sections."

Kurt Cobain, Thom Yorke, and many others have used this same "cut-up technique." Bowie actually also created a machine called a "verbicizer" to do the work for him automatically.

One of the most basic limitations that can be exceedingly fruitful to the creator is the very first one we mentioned today: time. In the book *Daily Rituals*, Mason Curry's fascinating catalogue of the habits of creative giants, the first, most obvious pattern I saw was that they all seemed to have a self-imposed schedule! It turns out that one of the best ways to harness the mysteries of creation is simply to organize them in time and space—have your daily routine, and ear-mark time for creation every day. Your ritual lets your brain know, "Ok, now it's time to create, even if I'm not sure what the result will be."

Along the same lines, Nick Cave states, "inspiration is a word used by people who aren't really doing anything. I go into my office every day

that I'm in Brighton and work. Whether I feel like it or not is irrelevant." Instead of inspiration, Burt Bacharach and Leonard Cohen also talk about setting aside time for exploration and discovery.

Pharrell and Mark Ronson provide further recent examples of the dogged craftsman-like approach—both "Happy" and "Uptown Funk" came about only after months and months of rejected experiments and attempts. Pharrell wrote and recorded nine completely different versions of what became "Happy." *The Guardian* writes that "Ronson laboured over ["Uptown Funk"] for six agonising months. He claims that he worked so hard on it that his hair started to fall out; at one point, the stress of trying to come up with a suitable guitar part caused him to vomit and faint." This is once again to illustrate that great ideas don't always arrive in a wild-eyed flash—they often appear only after crossing a long bridge made of bad ideas. To paraphrase Stephen Sondheim, "Great art hides its sweat."

Here are a few more quick examples specific to music-making:

Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards: one of her mechanisms, along with locking herself in a small, sweltering shipping container where she writes and records—is layering—superimposing simple percussive rhythms on top of each other to discover new more complex ones.

Chaz Bundick, AKA Toro y Moi uses the following "rule" for writing lyrics: "What do I do? How does that make me feel?"

Ruban Nilsson, AKA Unknown Mortal Orchestra, to help write lyrics, loops the music for hours and walks around singing gibberish, from which gradually emerges actual words, one cycle at a time.

Bob Dylan pulled back the veil on one of his organizing tools in a recent speech. I love this quote:

These songs didn't come out of thin air. I didn't just make them up out of whole cloth. Contrary to what Lou Levy said, there was a precedent. It all came out of traditional music: traditional folk music, tradition-

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—Bob Dylan

al rock & roll and traditional big-band swing orchestra music.

I learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs. And I played them, and I met other people that played them, back when nobody was doing it. Sang nothing but these folk songs, and they gave me the code for everything that's fair game, that everything belongs to everyone. For three or four years, all I listened to were folk standards. I went to sleep singing folk songs. I sang them everywhere, clubs, parties, bars, coffeehouses, fields, festivals. And I met other singers along the way who did the same thing and we just learned songs from each other.

If you sang 'John Henry' as many times as me—'John Henry was a steel-driving man / Died with a hammer in his hand / John Henry said a man ain't nothin' but a man / Before I let that steam drill drive me down / I'll die with that hammer in my hand.' If you had sung that song as many times as I did, you'd have written 'How many roads must a man walk down?' too.

He goes on connecting his material to other specific sources he used to define the creative world he would operate within.

David Bowie released twelve seminal albums in a single decade in part by simply changing inputs: changing the limitations, the materials, the stuff, in the sense that he used different personnel for each new incarnation, and that happenstance—loosely curated chemistry between the elements—helped craft something new and brilliant. Mick Ronson's "Panic in Detroit" became Carlos Alomar's "Sound and Vision."

A final, super-important, natural limitation is your actual knowledge or facility with a specific tool, such as piano, guitar. There's a time and a place to be a masterful technician, but history shows that being an amateur or a hobbyist or a neophyte is just as fruitful if not more so. I'm comfortable at the piano; so one thing that's interesting is picking up a guitar when I write, or making something electronic on the computer—and the beautiful thing about this rule or limitation is that there's an infinite number of things I don't know how to do, so I'll never run out of things to do badly in an interesting, potentially constructive way!

Here again, Brian Eno weighs in: "What's interesting about non-musicians is that they don't know what shouldn't be done," he says. "I find I get a lot of ideas from seeing the things tools can do that they weren't supposed to do."

What all this allows me to do as an artist is invaluable.

I can sit down and write a song using a zither and the cut up technique, with perfect rhyme and five-line verses and eight syllables per line. They're the mechanisms whose creative outcomes and limitations I can surrender to, that by themselves both generate and organize content.

What gives me hope about all this is that I know I don't have to feel like doing what I need to do every day to actually do it effectively. I don't have to feel comfortable, confident, and inspired. I don't even have to feel hopeful.

What gives me hope as an artist is that the discipline and practice of creativity itself gives birth to the inspiration, not vice versa. The perspiration can produce inspiration, or better yet, perspiration leads to discovery. If we consider with intention and design the structures and rules by which we operate as artists, these will become the seeds of inspiration, not the result of it.

Finally, I find hope in the idea that creativity and the practice of creating things can be simultaneously fully mysterious, yet fully accessible—you might even say, fully human, and fully divine. It gives me hope that there's no wrong way to write a song, but there are a million right ways.

The world is full of art-making tools, all at our disposal, and what gives me hope is that the specifics don't really matter, and the limitations can be happenstance or arbitrary. It's the act of sitting down to create with intention—to practice creativity and view the world creatively—that makes all the difference. ■

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hall/pop tradition with witty songs. A graduate of Andrews University, he has played for many television shows and music festivals, but composing music is now his main occupation.