

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.5

Denison Witmer interview – Episode Transcript

Denison Witmer: There's community around art. And there, and specifically in my life, there's community around my music, and that was really incredible to me, because I think I had forgotten that, just in the day to day grind of life.

[music]

Matt Conner: Welcome to The Resistance, a podcast that features honest discussion with meaningful artists about the opposing forces we all face when moving toward our better selves. I'm your host, Matt Conner.

Denison Witmer described it as a full stop to find a healthy headspace. It's hard enough to balance family and career, but even the vocational side was filled with tension for Witmer. On the one hand, he wanted the space to make music. On the other, he needed to use his carpentry talents to actually make money. It's a tension we all feel, right? Art and commerce. Is what we're chasing a hobby, or is it a business? And how far do we chase the thing that we want, at the cost of what we currently have?

After years of facing the resistance, and trying to find a happy medium with it all, Denison decided to simply call it off. The dreams were set aside, the goals were unfulfilled, it was time to finally give himself over to one side or the other. As a family man, there's no contest.

The last time we heard from Denison Witmer, the musician, was 2013. It was a self-titled release that was beautiful and intimate, everything we've come to love about Denison over the years. Twenty years, in fact. These days, however, things are coming back around. Witmer's busy creating new music in response to a fan who surprised him with a matching grant for donations from other fans, all intended to fund a brand new album, the first in six years.

While it's great to know that Denison is back with new music, and that more is coming soon, the reality is, his struggle was very real in the moment. Six years of silence. Six years of setting aside a dream. Six years of goals and ideas of things you chased, all of a sudden, for nothing. For what?

It's often impossible to know if we're doing the right thing when we give ourselves over to something creative. Is it a healthy drive, or is it unhealthy? Is it worth taking a physical toll, or worth losing time with family? What is worth the sacrifice, and how do you know if you've gone overboard?

This episode of The Resistance with Denison Witmer focuses on all of this and more. It's an honest conversation with an artist who's simply trying to make the best choices he can in the moment, for him and his family.

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Matt: Hello. Welcome back to Season One of The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. What matters far more than that is the fact that today we're sitting down with a favorite artist of mine, Denison Witmer. Denison, how are you today?

Denison: I'm doing pretty good, thanks.

Matt: I want to lead out the way we're leading out every episode in this first season, just to really help establish where we're going and why we're going there, by reading from Steven Pressfield's book, *The*

War of Art. It's kind of our source material for what even the term *The Resistance* means. And Denison, I'm hoping, after I just read these couple sentences, that that will kind of set up the conversation for us, because I'd love your response to what Pressfield writes, if that's cool.

Denison: Sure.

Matt: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the un-lived life within us. Between the two stands resistance." I guess for you, having your last album officially come out 5, going on 6 years ago, what does resistance look like for you, since it's been a little while? And yet I know some things are in the works.

Denison: Yeah, I mean, so for me it's a constant push and pull and balance. And it's also been, as you were reading that, I was thinking, what resistances have I had that I've realized are actually more life-giving than I'm giving them credit for? And what resistances have I created in my own mind?

I mean, the first thing that comes to mind is that, I have two little kids now, and it sounds terrible to say that they are resistance, because they definitely aren't, but the lifestyle of having two little kids was a major change for me. Going from 20 years touring and kind of having my schedule be whatever I want, to having a home life where I'm stationary, and I'm focusing on this new creative endeavor, which is honestly the most creative thing I've done, which is raising two little boys with my wife. I've had moments where I've been like, well my time is no longer my own.

How do I find that creative space in balance to being a father? The way I had to do it was just to be like, well like I just said, having that realization that this is actually the most creative thing I've ever done, and how do I just accept that and be fully present in that for awhile, and know that I'll come back to music at some point?

So yeah, we can get into all that. Because I'm finally starting to come back to the surface as the musician that I know myself to be, and I'm having to find my way back to that. And it's been an interesting negotiation with myself and my talent. And what I mean by talent, meaning relearning how to play guitar, almost, or relearning how to sing the way that I want to sing. All these things that I took a long break from, that I kind of had to teach myself to do again. But those things were always part of me. They're always inside of me. It's true what they say, the cliché, it's like riding a bike. You get back on and eventually figure it out again.

But the painful part is the process of, you know I just went into the studio to start a new project. I spent probably three or four days by myself in the studio here in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where I live. And I played guitar to a click track, I did some scratch vocals. I thought I was doing my final vocals. Who knows. I thought I was making a record.

I listened back to it two weeks later, and I was like, wow. This is terrible. All of the vocals are like, the songs are in the wrong key or the tempo is wrong. I was really depressed for a couple days, and then I just realized, this is just process. This is just me getting back to the person I know myself to be. And that takes time. And so that acceptance of the fact that it takes time really helped me. And now I feel much more like the musician I know myself to be. I feel much more enabled and empowered to keep making music again.

Matt: You opened a few doors I'd like to go in. The first being the familial aspect of this. When you said, oh then I realized that my most creative thing I could be doing, this great undertaking, is raising these children. Which I could totally see that as yes, that's true. I have a four-year-old boy myself. At the same time, it sounds also like very, like that sounds like a very, very positive spin of maybe something that was

a little more difficult to learn than just like making that quick switch. Was that an easy switch for you, or did that take some time to sort of sift through that?

Denison: It definitely took a lot of time. I mean, what's the best way to say it? I think that all of us have visions of the type of creativity that we want to put into the world. And the timelines and the projects that I've kind of projected for myself.

I'll go back a little bit. Right when I relocated back to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where I grew up, my wife and I moved back here about 4 or 5 years ago now. And I was in the middle of making a holiday record, actually. I'd just started it. Then we saw an opportunity to buy a new home, and so we moved, and I shelved that record.

And then relocating back to Lancaster, it was pretty obvious that our house needed a bunch of work, and I'm a carpenter as well, and I like to do that, so I got sidetracked with that. And then I was like, oh wow, if I'm not touring and I'm not making a record, I've got to come up with some sort of income, so I started a carpentry business. One thing led to another, and the next thing I know, there's this part of me that feels like, well I have a lyric in a new song of mine, where the lyric says, "I think I'm grieving the death of part of me." And I think that that feeling took me awhile to understand, that there was a person inside of me that I just didn't feel like I had access to, or I kept kicking the can down the road, and being like, I'll come back to that person. I'll come back to that person.

And with family life, and all the moving parts of family life, and two kids, I see it in my wife, too. There are so many things that she wants to do that we are now finally figuring out how to balance against just the busyness of our lives. And the demands of children. And it's delicate, right? Because you don't want to resent your children. But I think everybody has those moments where you're like, I don't resent my kids, but I resent the fact that I've got to like have a two-hour bedtime routine every night sometimes when I'd rather be trying to play guitar. Or sometimes when I'm trying to play guitar, my kids just want to come up and be hanging out with me, which is great, and there's no other better thing in the world, but when they're just strumming on the guitar at the same time that you're trying to work out a guitar part, you realize, 'Oh I've got to reserve this for a time when they're not around.' And by the end of the day, sometimes you're really tired and just want to lie down. So yeah, I think, I'm not afraid to say that I've had those moments where I've been really frustrated and very, sadly, resentful of the life I built for myself.

And that sounds so terrible, so I have to backtrack a little bit, or not backtrack, but I have to offer the other side of that, which is a very valid and big part of me, which is that I really believe that children are the most creative thing that I can do. And what I mean by that, it's a collaboration like no other collaboration I've been part of. With a song, I can rework it and work it to the point that I can get it wherever I want, and I get to put it into the world.

And with children, you're just trying to set a moral code, and at any point they can say to you, uh no. I don't want to do that. There's free will. And it's actually really beautiful, because if what they're saying no to isn't against your moral code, you have to be like, oh this is your personality. You're really into this one thing. Well I'm going to foster that, and I'm going to follow you through that journey. And I've learned so much about myself by following my children's interests and by encouraging them. And that's been a real encouragement to me, and it's been very exciting for me.

So I just, I kind of decided to go full stop on music for a while to focus on that. Because I didn't want to feel the resentment, and I didn't want to feel like I was missing out on anything. And I didn't want to feel, I never wanted to feel guilty for the career that I built, either. I didn't want to feel like, oh I really should be doing music. I really should be doing music. Why am I pushing it to the side? Why am I pushing it to

the side? I just wanted to relieve myself of all that and say, you know what? That part of me is still there. I just have to take a break from it and give this 100% of my attention until I have the mental capacity to do both. And I'm finally at that place now.

Matt: Earlier, you referred to it as, it's just going to be full stop for a bit. Did you know that that last part was true? For a bit? From the outside looking in, I'll say it this way. You had 15 years, and I've never interviewed an artist who didn't use, like your last album was a self-titled, and anyone I've ever talked to who used the self-titled approach after the first album, did so because it was so intensely personal. So like from the outside looking in, it seems like, oh gosh, he had a 15-year career, it ended with his, here's a personal album, there it is. Have you encountered people who thought maybe you were done? And did you yourself think that maybe you were done, or was that never on the table for you?

Denison: I mean, it's a really insightful question. I definitely self-titled it because in some part of my mind, it felt like a bookend. I said to myself, if this is going to be my last formal record, as Denison Witmer, then I want to self-title it, and I feel like I said everything I wanted to say at that time.

So yeah, there was a little part of me that thought maybe that was my last album. I also, you know I'm not a huge artist. I've got a fan base, but I don't, I'm not playing 300 capacity rooms consistently. Most of my fans are in the same place in their life that I am, which is that we all have families now or obligations that take up a lot of our time, so the ticket price of the show is no longer just the show. It's the babysitter and the scheduling and the whole thing. And I'm not one of those artists where when I announce a tour, people are like, buy the tickets the first night. We're going to get the babysitter scheduled and it's on the calendar in advance.

I live in people's lives the same, well I guess, I did a living room tour a few years ago, and I actually really enjoyed it, because to me, it was like, oh this is where my songs were written, and this is where they need to be performed, and this is the way my songs relate to people. I just kind of live alongside of them. And I realized that recording was really the best forward for me as a career, but then I was also really disheartened by the amount of money that I could make off of recorded music in terms of surviving.

And I'll say this. I didn't really transition with technology as well as I could have. And some of that has to do with the place in my life I was in as things were getting busier. But now I'm starting to understand that there is money to be made out of Spotify. There is more opportunity for song placements in film and television, and there's ways to make a living making music. But I just, I didn't want to rely on that. So what I did is I, when I decided to kind of just focus on, I almost said focus on the family, which I like, was like, I can't believe this is about to come out of my mouth. I can't believe this. This is not what I want to say. I don't want to be remembered as the guy who said "focus on the family." Because I'm not into that James Dobson stuff at all. But I will say, although I do think Ford missed a perfect opportunity to release a Ford Focus on the Family model, which, they should have done.

Matt: The minivan.

Denison: Yeah, the minivan. The Ford Focus on the family. Yeah exactly. Basically, I tried to actively sever the need for music to pay me in any way. I just didn't want to have my living have to be music. And for a long stretch of my life, it did. Because I didn't have a backup plan. It was like, I've got to make some money. I've got to go out on tour. I've got to put out another record. And I definitely burned out to some degree on that, and I was just like, well, I don't want music to have to pay me, because I don't really know what the future of the business looks like, so I'm going to start something else that funds my life, and then I'll do music as a hobby. And I'll release records when I can, and I have enough people out there who will hopefully appreciate when I do.

To be completely honest, I think it was probably reactionary of me in some ways, and I think it was a little short-sighted of me in other ways. And I think I'm now starting to understand that there may be a way for me to balance both of these careers that I have: my carpentry and my music alongside of each other. And kind of just follow along and see which one needs fostering at any given time. Try to kind of keep a foot in both worlds. So that's kind of what I'm trying to envision for the next year or two of my life, anyway.

Matt: How does that affect the way that you're, I'm not sure how to phrase it, like inspired. When you say something like you wanted to put an end to the need for, to make a living monetarily, that seems like a healthy cut, except I know for some people it's a healthy thing to need it. That the hustle makes them do what they need to do, make what they need to make. It drives them because they have to depend on it. And if not, it becomes like an unused muscle. Like someone who doesn't work out just for fun. I guess I wonder for you, what is that relationship?

Denison: Yeah, for me, it's never been monetary. I think I realize that it's my creative outlet, my emotional creative outlet. I'll just take a second to explain to you where my brain is at. So when I started carpentry, I do historic millwork, and I do cabinetry, and a pretty specified type of carpentry. And what I realized about that is that it's an analytical creativity. Someone says I need this thing built, and I need it to match this exactly. Or I have this design, or I design something. And I basically just draw up the plans, execute, assemble, and deliver it or install it. And it's very analytical. It's just analytical creativity. I'm not a wood artist in the sense that I'm making sculptures. It's not emotional creativity.

And the music is emotional creativity for me. Because it was, it's always been just a journaling process that started as writing journals, and then it became songs. And then, it hasn't ever really changed. I very rarely set out to write about something specific. I'm usually just writing in reaction to my life: my thoughts, my epiphanies. My desires. That's just the way I write. And so I've never felt the need for that to pay me. I've always felt very blessed that I was able to have a career and get paid to release music and tour, but I never felt like it has to be the thing that pays me. And I don't want it to be. I don't ever want to rely on it to be my income. It doesn't help me make music in any way to know that I'm being paid to do it.

Actually, that's not entirely true. The truth is that when I have money to make more music, when I have money for the time to be able to go into the studio and pay musicians and actually put a recording into the world, all those things take money, obviously. So that's welcome income. But simply sitting in my house and writing a song, I don't feel the need to be paid to do that. I went through a big phase where I thought, well, I don't think anybody's going to hear some of these songs. And I've written a lot of songs over the last 4 years that, if I had the funds and the time to go into the studio and record them and release them, people would, they might have been able to work their way into people's lives, but some of them I can't even sing with personal conviction anymore, and they're probably lost. They're gone. I say it's like fruit dying on the tree. It's no longer there, and I grieve the idea that I never released it, and maybe some of them will come back around to me in a way where I'll relate to them again and I'll be able to sing them with personal conviction, but until then, those songs are gone. I have to write something new. And whatever I record next will be a project that is just kind of a snapshot of where I am at this point in my life right now.

Matt: Has that always been one of the biggest creative litmus tests, or whatever, if you will, is the conviction angle?

Denison: Well yeah, because if you're not being honest, then what's the point? That's the way I try to live my life. And that's what I expect from people who I call my friends. It's like, I don't care if people

disagree with me. I don't care if people think I'm wrong. As long as someone's being honest with me, you can work from that point. You can have a healthy conversation and yeah. I don't know exactly what I'm trying to say. Sorry. But you know it's one of those things where it's like, if someone's being honest with you, you can't fault someone for feeling a certain way.

Matt: But those songs weren't dishonest.

Denison: No. You're absolutely right. Those songs weren't dishonest. But when I sing them now, I think I've worked through some of those feelings, and it doesn't feel great to revisit some of what I was going through at those times. And I will say this, too. I am a white man in Trump's America right now. I don't feel like I am in a position to complain. I think I am definitely in a position to talk about my feelings. I think I'm definitely in a position to, yeah, like what I just said, be honest with people. But some of the songs that I wrote the last couple of years, I just felt like I was trying to figure out what I was doing, and listening back to them, I just felt like I was complaining. And I am not disenfranchised. I am not struggling. I mean I have struggles, but in terms of what's actually going on in the world, I am very, very fortunate. And I don't want to be associated with this white guy complaining about his life. There's too much to be joyful for, and there's too many other causes that I can get involved with that would be a better use of my time. So I'll release the songs that don't rub me the wrong way when I sing them.
[laughs]

Matt: But songwriting was at least helpful for you to work through that in the season that you were working through it?

Denison: Oh definitely. Yeah, definitely. Writing in general. And I will say, part of not being paid, part of accepting that I don't need to be paid for it is also that freedom of saying, I can put these songs in a shoebox and stuff them under my bed and it doesn't matter. It's okay. It's the process of writing the song that's the cathartic necessary thing.

And I go back and forth on this too. Because I think, well you know, I've always said, create selfishly, give selflessly. That's the perfect equation for me. When I can be as selfish as possible when I'm in my creative mindset, and as selfless as possible when I'm in the sharing mindset. That's my best possible self. But I also am understanding that some things just don't need to exist outside of my own space.

It's the same way as like my wife keeps a journal. She's also a writer. We were talking about this the other night. She was just saying, I just feel like I'm, she feels like her writing chops just aren't quite there right now. She said, I read something that I wrote before, and I felt like it was so good, and I felt like I was expressing my emotions in a way that I really wanted to. And that language was colorful and it was concise, and she was like, now when I write, I don't feel that way. And I said to her, you know, when you're writing in your journal, you don't have an audience, do you? You're not planning on publishing your journals. And she was like, no, I'm not. And I said, then you don't need to worry about it. Just write. You just have to get it out of you. Worry about it later. If you're going to share it with somebody, worry about the editing, worry about how it appears and how you want to present yourself at a point where that's important to you. But if it's not important to you, it doesn't matter. It just gets in the way of your creative process. You just need to be free association.

Which is another thing that I really try to lean hard on. I love free association. I think that it is maybe the most true creative parts of our selves, to free associate. And that's always the way that I start songs is just to ad lib and come up with ideas, and I figure, whatever's on my mind is going to come out of me, and I can edit it and shape it from there.

Matt: Can you give us, by the way, have you read *The Artist's Way*?

Denison: Um, is it, I'm trying to think of the name of the writer.

Matt: I have to admit, I forget, too.

Denison: Robert something? I can't remember. I think I have read it. I was thinking, oh no it's Julia Cameron.

Matt: Yeah, that's it. That's it. She advocates waking up early in the morning, doing the morning pages.

Denison: Yeah. I haven't read it. I read another one with a similar title that a friend gave me, and I can't remember the name of that author for the time being.

Matt: If you're such a staunch advocate for free association, I'd love to get you to give us a tangible, like what does that look like for you? You just said, Sylvia Cameron would say get up early, freewrite by hand before everyone else gets up. What does your process look like when you're in that mode?

Denison: Well, that's a very, very good question, Matt, because my process is kind of just being reborn right now. I feel like as I am refocusing on music, I am trying to figure out what that looks like for me to spend time with focused work on the songs. I don't know. I'm a night owl, so usually it has, it's a late night thing for me. And it's just playing guitar on my couch and just, like I said, ad libbing lyrics until something takes shape. And then working on it from there.

I do love the idea of getting up early and writing before anyone else gets up, but I'm just much more comfortable in the nighttime hours of my days. I see it for me being something that I do really late at night. Yeah.

Matt: Sure.

Denison: Yeah, it would be interesting. Ask me that question in a few months, as I work on this new album. I mean, I'm moving into making a new album now, as a result of a fundraiser that I did through Instagram. Just kind of telling my fans. I had a really generous fan offer me a grant, a matching grant, if I had my fans raise the rest of the amount. So they matched up to \$5000, and I had a week to raise the money. So I was given, between my fans and this generous donor, I was given \$10,000.

Matt: Wow.

Denison: Yeah, so it was such a beautiful experience, and in a lot of ways, it really reconnected me to my creative self, just humbling myself and saying, okay. I have to do carpentry to keep my family in motion, and I'm not going to make another album until I have time to just hang up the carpentry tools and focus on writing.

So I used the money to get the album started. I've been up in the studio, working on just getting the sketches of the songs into place, and recording some holiday songs as a gift to my fans, which I just put out like a free EP for people to download. And I used some of the money, honestly just to take a month and a half here to just actively write and go through my demos and be like, what was I doing for the last couple years? What was I writing? What was, was it all a mess, or was anything good? What sticks out to me? It's all starting to take shape now.

So I'm kind of actively working on music now, again. Which is just great.

Matt: Denison, tell me this. If your last album was 2013, and then here in the middle of 2018 a fan says, hey, I'm going to match \$5,000, and then all of your other fans come alongside, and you receive this gift 5 years later, I'm just wondering what that tells you about your music. Yeah, I'll leave it at that.

Denison: Well, what it told me is that all of the times in the last four years that I've felt like I had a 20 year career that ended in carpentry, no real knowing whether or not I was going to make music, and if people would listen to it and if it means anything to them. And don't get me wrong. I get emails from people occasionally, saying, hey we're using one of your songs in our wedding, or this song really touched me today, or I'm back in a phase of listening to your music again, and it's always been a really big part of my life. That stuff is not lost on me. I don't take any of that for granted. I absolutely am just so thankful for it.

But there's still long stretches of time where you just go, okay, what am I doing? Does any of that matter? That's the self-doubt part of your brain. And well what the fan that donated the money really taught me was that if I just go to people and say, I need money to make music, and this is the structure of it, will you join in? It was just really, for lack of a better word, it was a really heart-warming experience to be able to say to my fans, I want to make another record, and I have some more songs I want to share with you, and this is the only way it's going to happen. And to have everyone rise to the occasion and support me.

And in that, I got so many nice letters and so many people who donated way more than I was ever anticipating. Like several people who donated a couple hundred dollars, who just said, I've been listening to your music on streaming services for the last several years. This is my way of paying you back. There is value to that, and it was really beautiful, and honestly, it gave me that feeling like oh, I need to do that, I need to put something, I need to give something back. It was very, what's the word I'm looking for? It basically created like a mutual understanding, that I'm sharing something with them, and they're willing to share something back to me to be able to give back to them. It was a very symbiotic relationship, which is really beautiful.

So yeah. I don't really know where things are going to go with me. And I'm not so concerned about that anymore. I just kind of feel like, if I can make music, and I can put it into the world when I can, I at least know there are people there who will hopefully listen to it, and hopefully it will work its way into their lives. And that they'll be there for me when I need them, as well, which is really cool.

Matt: That's a wonderful illustration of what community can look like.

Denison: Yeah, thanks, Matt. Yeah. And you know what, you used the best word for it. It's community. That's really what it is. It's the understanding that there's a community, there's community around art, and specifically in my life, there's community around my music, and that was really incredible to me. Because I think I had forgotten that just in the day-to-day grind of life. And self-doubt and just all the things that consume us. Social media, all that. Everything. It's like a kiss and a curse, right? Social media, to me, is just such a weird, it's a really weird medium, but in a situation like I'm currently in now, it's what got me back into being able to continue. So I'm ultimately thankful for it, as well.

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Matt: You've been listening to The Resistance. If you've enjoyed this episode, please rate us on iTunes and subscribe on your favorite podcast app. And for more information and further episodes, you can find us at listentotheresistance.com. Our theme is composed by Chad Howat. Engineering, production, and additional music by Jay Kirkpatrick. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host.

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Matt: Join us for our next episode: a conversation with pop artist Sarah Jaffe.