**THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.10
Drew Holcomb interview – Episode Transcript**

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[theme music]

**Matt:** 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.

Most days, you’ll see me slouching. As a writer, I’m consistently hovered over my 5-year-old Macbook Pro, an aluminum-clad companion to which I pull up each and every morning. Breaks are taken, lunches eaten, errands are run. By and large, I’ll once again settle back into the slouch. Yes, I realize that’s not a good thing. Posture, I’m told, is important. A chiropractor told me years ago to sit on one of those giant medicine balls. Or maybe try a standing desk. But let’s be honest. One feels outright silly, and the other is uncomfortable after an hour. Someday, I’ll figure out that physical side.

Posture, as it turns out, also has a creative side. According to singer-songwriter Drew Holcomb, when it comes to facing the resistance, and overcoming those limitations, posture is everything against what he calls “the winds of resistance.” Drew says he feels the same amount of resistance as ever before, but he’s learned how to position himself so he doesn’t get knocked back. He’s established the foothold. He knows the angle at which to lean in. And even when he feels the familiar forces at work against him, he’s able to remain obedient to the fragile, creative impulses.

Drew’s own catalogue is a testament to this learned posture. It took several albums to develop the fervent audience and broad musical family he enjoys today. Now, as he headlines the Ryman, plays late-night tv, curates his own music festivals, and even creates his own vinyl subscription service, few artists are spinning as many creative plates as Drew these days, let alone to also release music as compelling as that on his brand new album, *Dragons*. It’s all the result of having the right posture.

[music]

**Matt:** For those of us still learning how to stand, or which way to lean, Drew was kind enough to recently sit down and discuss his own history of wrestling with the resistance.

[music]

**Matt:** All right. Welcome to The Resistance. We’re here with Drew Holcomb. We have the privilege of speaking to him today. Drew, how are you today?

**Drew:** I’m doing great. Thanks for having me.

**Matt:** Yeah, well we appreciate you coming on and being part of this first season of The Resistance. Throughout this first season, I actually just want to read a couple sentences that come from Steven Pressfield’s book, *The War of Art*, which is actually what informs the theme of the whole podcast. And he says this. He says, “Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands resistance.” I guess I just wanted to start with you on this subject, just kind of asking what your current relationship is to resistance, in whatever form that’s taking in your life.

**Drew:** Yeah. I think for me, by this point in my work life, which is a creative life, having sort of taken a lot of steps over the years to kind of do battle with the resistance to those -- when you read that quote, I was thinking kind of, in that spectrum, I certainly feel like I’m leaning heavy into the life that, the creative life that is within us. You never feel like you arrive at it, so I feel like in some ways, for me, I’ve kind of shored up the foothold that keeps me leaning in that direction, but you never quite feel like you arrived, because it takes work, and it takes self-reflection, and it takes cooperation in order for that life to kind of be realized. And so you never, the wind of resistance never stops blowing headlong into you. Sometimes you, at least I feel like, I’m not going to get blown over.

**Matt:** Yeah. You know, what makes me curious about someone with your sort of longevity, because on the outside, and maybe for those who don’t know, but you’ve had roughly one recording every year for the last decade or so. I just saw you and Ellie put out tour dates for early next year. Some of those have sold out. You’ve got your own record club, the Magnolia Vinyl Club, which just introduces a lot of great music. And then you’re also curating your own music festival that seems to be going really well.

All of that to say, it makes me curious how you’ve learned to maybe lean into the creative things that are in front of you and really kind of get over the resistance. And it also makes me wonder really just how much resistance you feel today, when you’ve had some good successes under your belt.

**Drew:** Yeah, there’s a lot to unpack in the question. But I’ll start with the idea that where I feel the most resistance is typically in the songwriting process. Touring, and even recording, those tend to feel like pretty quickly and easily satisfying for me. I certainly experience my fair share of fear with getting on stage, depending on the context of the day or the place, or personal health always can kind of play a role when touring.

But I find that songwriting is still the hardest place to find – there’s not necessarily a reciprocal relationship between the amount of work you put into songwriting and the satisfaction you get from the finished content. Because there have been times where I’ve been, kind of writer’s block for what feels like months. And finally get a song written and it’s not good, and I still feel like I’m stuck in the block. Where other times it feels like I show up to write three days in a row, and all three of the songs I’m really proud of and feel authentic to my kind of creative voice. So that’s, but regardless, you still have to kind of show up and do the work.

So for me, in that, one of the reasons I’ve started these, the record club and the festival, and have a large output of music, is I feel like, for my sort of personality, perspective, what you can’t control creatively, you can have a little more control by sort of controlling the business side of it. I think so many artists either feel too cool for the business side, or they feel ashamed that they care, or they rely on their team to do all that work for them.

And I think there’s actually, for me, there’s a lot of satisfaction in seeing a creative work kind of find an audience, even if it’s a small or limited audience. And so part of the shoring up to the resistance that the creative process is taking a break, and then going and finding an audience for what you’ve already created. I find that to be, in and of itself, a creative endeavor. It’s an entrepreneurial endeavor. It’s hard. It requires almost as much, if not more, risk sometimes than the creative process does.

**Matt:** I knew a few albums back, you guys had a release with Dualtone, and then pulled right back into your own label, Magnolia. Is that right?

**Drew:** Yeah, that’s right.

**Matt:** And is that why you chose to do that, to create, to keep that control and drive that bus, so to speak?

**Drew:** Part of it was that, and part of it was the timing of the industry. While I was on Dualtone with that album, Chasing Sunday, my team of manager and booking agent and publicist, everything flipped. And the new team that I had, had a track record of releasing records independently in a way that my previous albums had not sort of had that sort of success.

So the Dualtone folks were amazing, but they know, my manager, their names are both Paul and Paul. So Paul at Dualtone knew my new manager at the time, Paul, who is still my manager, but he was new then. So there was just kind of a conversation that happened, and they said, if you want to do it by yourself, we feel as confident that you will succeed with your new manager in that situation as you will with us. And so we kind of like freely give you the blessing to go do your own thing, even though contractually, there was no obligation either way. Yeah, there was a sense that Dualtone kind of showed me how to do it, and I learned, and it was like, okay. Now I can do this alone.

But it’s interesting, because the industry has even changed. That was seven or eight years ago. The industry has changed now. And we always have that conversation again with every record. Okay, should we find a label partner on this one or not? I’m sure at some point that answer will be yes. The last few times it’s been no, but at some point, it’ll be yes.

**Matt:** We were talking about your output, and you were talking about going through some writer’s block, maybe even going months, and then here comes a song that’s not good, like you said. And yet, the output has been so prolific. At least, very consistent. So that makes me wonder how disciplined you are of a songwriter, like do you have a rigid schedule? How do you stay focused in the midst of that resistance?

**Drew:** I don’t have a rigid schedule, in that I don’t have certain days or times that I write every week. But I do write every week. And I make sure that it’s scheduled, but it’s flexible. If I’m co-writing, that takes logistical work, so that tends to be scheduled in advance. But then the EP that I did with my friends Johnnyswim was actually very sort of in the moment. We had lunch one day in Nashville, Abner and I did, and started talking about maybe writing a song together.

So I put a date on the books to fly out there and write a song. It happened to coincide with the Charlottesville race riot, kind of race rally, however you want to, the right word is. And we were super upset about all that, and the sort of leadership response to it, and so we wrote “Ring the Bells” and “Goodbye Road” as a response to that moment. You can’t plan that kind of stuff. It just happens.

And then a month later I wrote a song with Penny and Sparrow that sort of felt like it was a companion piece to the songs I had written with Abner and Amanda. So it was planned in the sense that I bought a flight and we were going to write songs, but then the actual experience of what the writing felt like felt very in-the-moment. So that’s part of the creative process for me, is just showing up and making time for it and hoping that when it happens, there’s some magic. But you only need like 10% of magic if you write enough songs. If I write 80 songs in a year, I only need like 10 of them to be good.

**Matt:** [laughs] That’s a pretty low batting average.

**Drew:** Yeah. And that’s, but like you said, that would make me pretty prolific. Because if I released a record a year, 10 songs, which I don’t do that. I usually release like every 2 years. And then the stuff you hear in the middle years is an EP or a live record, or we did a covers thing years ago. You don’t have to have a high batting average if you do the work enough.

**Matt:** Can you take me back to when you’re first starting, and maybe the resistance you felt as a young artist with maybe dreams. Or I don’t even know. Maybe you can tell me. Did you have pretty tangible dreams? Were you just making music just to make music in the first place?

**Drew:** No, I had very tangible dreams. I wanted to make a living. I wanted to, and part of that was the external pressure that people around you are like, “So, how long are you going to this?” And you’re like, “Well it’s my job. How long were you going to do what you do?” So there was a strong sort of pride, prove the critics wrong, piece the younger I was. That sort of got weaker over time, but it was very strong from the outset.

And then, I mean my goals at first were to sell out, this small venue’s in Memphis called the Hi Tone, which held about 350 people. And then 3rd and Lindsley back in Nashville, which at the time, had like 100 or 250 people. So my goals were pretty modest, but they still took like 3 to 4 years. The music sort of process of finding your audience, for most people, is very long and slow and you work a decade or two to be a quote unquote “overnight success.” But yeah. I did not plan on doing this professionally for more than a couple years, though, to be honest.

So in that sense, I did not grow up thinking and dreaming of being an artist. In high school, my dream was to be a history professor, which is super nerdy, but it’s just who I was. That’s kind of an interesting piece of the puzzle for me, is I did not sit around playing guitar, dreaming of being on stage my whole life. So in some ways, that’s given me freedom to enjoy the process more I think than some. Because there was not an expectation. There was a hope, but there was not an expectation. Those are two very different things.

**Matt:** Do you feel like you have a better, if it all fell apart and I had to do something else, you have a better fallback plan than maybe a lot of your peers?

**Drew:** You know, it’s funny. The longer I do it, the less I feel like I have a fallback plan. [laughs] Because you get to where it’s your job and your income, and you have kids, and so you go, the resistance and the pressure now is a lot more practical, because it’s like, this has to work. Because we’ve built a life around it. But at the same time, you also have the confidence that, we have the confidence that we didn’t have 5, 7, 10, 14 years ago. So I think it kind of goes both ways.

**Matt:** Can you take me to the first, and it may not be accurate, as much as our memories are accurate, but you mentioned, “I don’t have the confidence. I have the confidence now that I didn’t have X amount of time ago.” Do you remember the first time you really felt confident as an artist? Was it the moment you sell out one of those clubs you sell out, like the 3rd and Lindsley, or the Hi Tone, or was it before or after that?

**Drew:** That’s a great question. I think the confidence came for me, there were snippets of confidence all along the way, like yes, selling out a show at the Hi Tone or playing the 3rd and Lindsley radio show on Sunday night. Selling a certain number of albums in a crowd and feeling like there was just a great response. But really the biggest moment for me was after I wrote the song called Live Forever, and it was the first time I had toured where people were actively singing along every word to a particular song, and it was mostly strangers, faces I did not recognize. And that felt like, okay, the work is winning. I’m not just like forcing this thing to happen. The music itself is doing some of the work.

**Matt:** Gosh, I love that phrase, “the work is winning.” I wanted to touch on something that you said, which was, today the resistance takes on the form of really family provision. I’m assuming that you and your wife employ people. That it’s not just you depending on your music, and probably not even just your family. Is that correct?

**Drew:** Oh yeah. There’s definitely a number of people that at least part time count on provision, of our work providing a decent part of their income. Yeah.

**Matt:** Does that become problematic at all, or difficult to protect, when there’s sort of that commerce instinct; hey, I need this to work, because we have mouths to feed, bills to pay? And yet, at the same time, I’m assuming you want the integrity of the work. Do those two ever come in contact with each other?

**Drew:** Yeah. They come in contact with each other a lot. I mean, that’s the greatest tension in my life and my work, is that the work has to provide. The good news for me is that I always sort of towed a hard line that I’m going to make work that feels authentic for me, and that’s why I had success. So it’s easy for me to, not easy for me, but it’s practical for me to stay the course and make work that feels authentic, because that’s what brought me success in the first place. If I had started out by covering someone else’s song and having it be a big hit and trying to write my own songs and follow up and not working, then that’s sort of like covering other people’s songs would be the standard, because that’s what brought me success. But that’s not been the case for me.

Early on, I had promoters that were like, hey, I’m going to get you to open up for so-and-so country band, and you need to kind of make your songs a little more country. And I’m like, I don’t want to do that. That’s not. So I made those decisions early on. I just think, for me, because I didn’t compromise when I was young, it’s not really a part of the conversation for me now that I’m sort of older, more established.

Certainly you see things happen with peers, and you want to, you’re kind of like, man, maybe I should do it that way. It can be an easy temptation, I guess, would be the right word. But also looking at that and going, well is that authentic for them? Maybe it is authentic for us to do something like that on a recording, or try that interesting thing live. But then there’s other things that don’t feel authentic to me and my sort of creative self. I think establishing that from the beginning has made it sort of the standard, so I don’t really run into that kind of in my psyche as much as I thought I would.

**Matt:** Hey, by the way, what informed that so early on for you?

**Drew:** Well, again, this wasn’t the plan. I didn’t like, being on stage and having a crowd shower me with attention was not the point. I did this because I loved songs, and music had meant a lot to me growing up. And I loved the emotion of it. I loved the feeling of having a song that connected with someone’s story or the emotional moment of that part of their life. So to have done it in another way would have been, I just would have rather kept going to school and be a history professor.

Thankfully for me, some of that’s personal. I grew up in a family where my parents and my siblings were pretty supportive of each other, so I didn’t have this chip on my shoulder, trying to find my identity and place in music. It was more about feeling like I was bearing witness to something good that I had seen in music and in the world around me and wanting to offer that to the world. Not because I needed the attention.

Now, don’t get me wrong. You get the attention, and it feels good, and you can get lost in it. But it was not the initial purpose.

[theme music]

**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. Join us for our next episode with Toad the Wet Sprocket singer and solo artist, Glen Phillips.