

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 14

Nathan Johnson interview – Episode Transcript

Nathan: The worst way to try to make something is with no rules. You need the parameters to know how to push as far as you can up against that. You need the canvas for the painting. You need to define what the playground is. And that's the thing that lets you go all the way up to the edges of it.

[music/intro]

Matt: Welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner. I'm here with my good friend and all-things-audio-and-production, Jay Kirkpatrick.

Jay: Hello.

Matt: How are you, Jay?

Jay: I'm great.

Matt: Today, we're opening up this next leg of our podcast by talking to composer Nathan Johnson. Have you seen *Knives Out*?

Jay: I have, yes. Great movie.

Matt: It is a great movie, and Nathan's work in the film, in particular, bolsters Rian Johnson's work, who's actually his cousin, really well. If you're into film soundtracks, you may know Nathan's work as sort of an avant-garde composer from films like *Brick* or *Looper*, in which he takes field objects and makes his own instruments out of them. At one point, he told me they were thinking about pushing televisions off of warehouse roofs and recording them, just to see what they could do.

But the thing, today's episode, and you'll hear this in a little bit, in our conversation, Nathan operates on a whole other level that I have a hard time relating to, which is he loves learning new things. Like that show *Fear Factor*, he could have been a contestant on that. There's just no fear for him to try new things, engage in new ways. I don't know if you work that way, but I'm kind of the opposite.

Jay: No. No. Listening, as I'm editing the interview, just him talk about how he, it's kind of like a kid in a sandbox. He jumps into different sandboxes, and he makes different things out of what's in it, and it doesn't matter what's in it. It's really interesting to hear him talk about his creative process, because in some ways, at that level, it's rare to find someone that's able to do that well, and trusted to do that well, and so it was pretty amazing to hear him talk about it.

Matt: Yeah. Stay tuned for the conversation. You're going to love it. You may not relate to it at all, but you'll find it challenging and inspiring to actually not just kind of dip your toe in the water –

Jay: Now you know, Matt, not everybody is like you, where they have to have everything planned out. There are many people who will relate to having no idea what to do and just figuring it out as you go.

Matt: Hey, look. I don't work that way. It takes me forever. Yeah. Anyway, I found it very challenging, and also very inspiring. And I wish I could be more like Nathan. So let's just go right in. Here's our conversation with Nathan Johnson.

Matt: Nathan, how are you today?

Nathan: Good. Nice to talk with you, Matt.

Matt: Just saw the movie. I mean, the movie's thrilling, and it's just such a fun cinematic experience. And then it's been so great to see that kind of excellent work gaining such traction, it seems both critically and commercially. Are you feeling that way?

Nathan: Yeah, yeah definitely. I mean, I remember, from the point I read the script, I was so excited about it. But even seeing an early test screening, it was really excited to see the way that audiences were starting to react to it. So yeah, it feels amazing to see everyone loving it so much.

Matt: Nathan, I'm sure we'll get back to *Knives Out*, obviously, and some other work. I want to begin where we begin each episode, and that is with our source material, if you will. It's called *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield. "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the un-lived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Nathan, for you, I'm curious, what form does that resistance take on to you? Or does that statement even feel true to you, and how do you wrestle with that?

Nathan: I think that is the great challenge of anyone trying to make something in the artistic world. We, in our western culture, we grow up, and I certainly remember growing up, getting summer jobs, and those summer jobs not anywhere near aligning with anything I was interested in. And I remember when I was just out of high school, I remember thinking, there must be some way to get a job that also involves doing something that I enjoy.

My cousin, Rian, who obviously directed *Knives Out*, but he and I, and all of our cousins, sort of grew up as kids, spending all of our free time making movies and music. And I do remember really clearly thinking around that time, is there a way to get a job that involves the stuff that I also love doing all day, every day? But definitely there's an element of, we all grew up in a family where, I know that our grandparents and our parents all loved the arts, but that was not their vocation. And so I think we'll probably talk philosophically about the idea of the resistance, but maybe a helpful starting place to just admit is that if we haven't grown up with families in the arts, that that first very practical step is really hard to figure out how to even start to structure a life that allows you to do this.

Matt: That's really interesting to me, that you're asked about resistance in the present, on a general level, and for you, there's already a differentiation. It sounds like immediately, you go, I'm assuming there's general resistance for people who, we all feel it, but there's extra for people who didn't grow up like I did, with encouragement –

Nathan: Totally.

Matt: and support system, and that you're so cognizant of that.

Nathan: Yeah, well it's one of the things that I just feel like it's not a very helpful thing to hear somebody say, "Just go do it!" And not take into consideration all the help that I've had in setting up a starting platform to take that leap. But I do think, so that, for me I think, is the ground level of just feeling really, really thankful for the belief and the encouragement from my family and friends that have kind of set up the ability to take a jump. And I do feel like, even for me, with that support, it feels like there are key moments in my life where it was taking a jump, where it felt like jumping off a cliff and not knowing where I was going to land. However, I think part of what helps me take that jump is knowing that there's a safety net. And I never want to pretend like that's not there, because I think that's unhelpful for people who may feel like they don't have a safety net.

Matt: What feels like a jump, to you, these days?

Nathan: So now we get into the philosophical part.

Matt: Well, I mean, I certainly hear what you're saying on the background. I think that's really important. It's easy for a talking head, motivational speaker, someone to just stand up there and give you this advice that worked for them. If someone's born on third base, to tell you how to get home is a different journey than when you're up at the plate with the count already against you.

Nathan: Totally.

Matt: So I get that. But I did want to flip forward a bit, because earlier you said you're in the middle of doing press for *Knives Out* right now. You're talking about this successful film that's come after other successful films. This endeavor, I'm assuming, is going to lead you to other successful avenues, just as one thing kind of leads you to the next. And so I guess I wonder. You know, you called it "the jump" earlier. Like it's still the jump, even if you have support or not.

Nathan: Totally.

Matt: And I wonder now, what is the jump? Does it feel less like a leap, or are there some aspects of creating, or even personally, that distance that we said, the distance between who you are now, maybe even personally, and who you want to be, whatever that is, what feels like that jump for you today?

Nathan: Is it cool if I jump up to the first movie I did, rather than jumping immediately to today?

Matt: You can do whatever you want. Yeah.

Nathan: I was living in England, had just finished this band project, and my cousin Rian had just finished shooting *Brick*. For those who haven't seen *Brick*, it's a super low-budget, really smart but super weird movie. So he kind of hit me up, and he was like, hey, do you want to, and although I had grown up making music my whole life and making movies my whole life, I had kind of never thought before that point to combine them together.

But basically my default is I'll do anything with Rian. And I feel that way about my close collaborators. My core thing is let's make cool stuff. So when he asked me that, I was like, yeah. Of course. And jumped, not knowing anything about what I was doing. And I feel like a really key part of that jump and what feels like that, is saying yes to things that you don't know how to do.

And this is this concept that I talk a lot about with my brother who runs this firm called the Made Shop, which is kind of a graphic design, architectural firm. And the idea that we've talked a lot about is, clearly we all have this fear of not knowing how to do something. Or I guess to drill down further, the fear is maybe looking stupid or doing something and not having it turn out well, because we don't know what we're doing.

For me, I think that getting comfortable with that feeling is key to making art, almost at a definitional level. Because definitionally, if you are doing something new, that means you've never done it before, and as a result, you don't know how to do it. And I think for me, there's always a fear in that moment when you jump into doing something you've never done before, but I've spent a lot of time in my life practicing making those jumps.

So I've gotten used to the feeling of that uncomfortableness that comes with not knowing how to do something. But the alternative is to keep doing, if we're trying to do only things we know how to do, by definition we'll keep doing the same thing over and over again.

Matt: Are you committed to those – do you find yourself motivated to continue to explore these new things, by personality trait?

Nathan: I guess so, yeah. I think that's probably a good question, but I do, just personally I love the discovery of new things. I think we're all wired differently. I remember talking with a friend of mine and just kind of realizing that his whole engine that drives him has to do with exploring and then bringing it back to a few people and sharing that.

I think for me, part of the way that I'm wired is, I love puzzles. I love games. I love kind of figuring out new ways to do things. And figuring out for the first time how to do something that I've never done before. But also, I think to back that up, that those types of things are also the types of creation and art that I really enjoy. I love playing around with imperfection, and I guess part of me has gotten comfortable with the idea that things don't have to be perfect. And in fact, sometimes they're better when they're not perfect, to be shared with other people.

Matt: My mind goes to what I know about your work on the film *Looper*, when we're talking about this, in terms of doing things in new ways, and maybe not being afraid of that. Because that was quite a departure, maybe from what people would normally think in terms of scoring a film would involve, correct?

Nathan: Yeah.

Matt: Can you define that, by the way, for those who don't know?

Nathan: I mean, so what we did with *Looper*, like I remember at the beginning of that project, and this is also, to be honest, kind of marks the beginning of every project that I do with Rian. We kind of jump into a whole new sandbox, and these conversations happen where he just starts talking about maybe references that he's connecting with a story that he just wrote. But for *Looper*, I remember he was like, what if we go into warehouses and push TVs off the roof? Or what if the whole score is one chord? And I'm like, okay. I don't know how, but partly excited. But when he said, what if the whole score is one chord? And I'm like, I don't know how that is a thing. You know, and we didn't end up doing that, but what we did do is we ended up creating basically an atmospheric sound design score.

So my really good friend, Ryan Lott, who's been in *Son Lux*, he's been a longtime collaborator. And one of the things that he does is he builds sample-based instruments out of found sounds or samples. So he basically, I brought him on board, and he kind of taught me his whole process of how to build these software instruments.

So then what I did is I moved down to New Orleans where they were shooting the movie, and I took a field recorder and spent a month wandering around the city, recording the sound of industrial fans or water flowing or doors closing or the treadmill in my hotel. And then basically brought this whole library back, and we built these, we turned these sounds into playable, atmospheric instruments that could also be played melodically.

So the score for *Looper* is essentially, there are some real instruments, as well, but a lot of it is these custom field recordings turned into playable instruments. There's not a lot of melodic stuff in that movie. It's basically one theme that kind of repeats and evolves over the whole movie.

Matt: You said you and Rian jump into a new sandbox every time. So what's the sandbox for *Knives Out*?

Nathan: So, for *Knives Out*, we were listening to a lot of the scores that we loved from the late 50s, early 60s, and these are now, as opposed to *Looper*, these are super melodic motif-based themes. And we knew we wanted to do a big orchestra. Actually, Rian told me the idea for *Knives Out*, like 10 years ago, and

I've been thinking about the way the movie was going to open, and kind of playing around with these small chamber ideas. But as I talked with Rian, he was like, well the whole thing is basically like a parlor room mystery. And I think to play against that, we don't want to keep the score little and contained, we want to kind of blow the whole thing open and do just a big, lush orchestral score. But at the same time, we wanted to be sharp and cutting and precise. So I wrote this quartet piece for the intro, but then we kind of blow that open into a full orchestral score. That was kind of the first time that I was doing this big of a full score with everything together. We got to record at Abbey Road.

So this sandbox is playing with a much bigger palette. And in a way, definitely a much more traditional approach, but I think we're still sort of bringing interesting alternative ways of playing. I guess kind of just highlighting all the instruments so that it's not just a blurry wash of sound, but we can hear every single voice and what they're doing.

Matt: The way that you described the music feels like an apt descriptor of the script, or of the movie. Sharp, precise –

Nathan: Totally.

Matt: these angles, from every – was that mirrored on purpose, then?

Nathan: For sure. Yeah, and Rian kept saying, I remember sketching up some early ideas, and he was like it's too big and blurry and reverb-y. He kept saying it should be like a knife. It should be cutting like a knife. And every decision kind of flowed out of that, from the way I was writing, down to the room where we recorded it. So Abbey Road is, the Studio One there is this amazing room, but it doesn't have like a huge, long reverb tail. So we could be really precise in the way that we captured the music that I had written.

The other thing about Knives out is the script is phenomenal, but it's very wordy. It's these amazing performances, all these actors dancing around each other. And so the music has to be very scored to picture, and it has to bob and weave and kind of move but never step in the toes or get in the way of anything the actors are doing.

Matt: You've worked with Rian several times here. What does permission look like within this relationship?

Nathan: I mean, Rian is really, really great to collaborate with. This is just kind of crystallized in my mind recently, but he knows exactly what he wants at a broad level, and he's really good about setting up the parameters of the sandbox that we're going to be playing in, but then once we have those sort of goalposts, those restrictions, he's just like, "surprise me." And this is like an old principle in art: the worst way to try to make something is with no rules. You need the parameters to know how to push as far as you can up against that. You need the canvas for the painting. You need to define what the playground is. And that's the thing that lets you go all the way up to the edges of it.

So that's really great with Rian, but I think the other thing is, when he says, "no, this isn't it," in my mind, I'm not trying to write my masterpiece. I'm trying to tell his story. I have other outlets for expression for my ideas, but this is really about how do I help him tell the story that he has in his head? So in terms of this, I really, it's deferring to Rian. And that's not to say that there's not back and forth, but I know that my job is to tell his story.

Matt: Is that vital to have those other outlets where, after working on something like this, or before, you have other things with complete ownership?

Nathan: Yeah. I think so. I think that, again, is part of the way that I'm wired, but I love writing, I love, whether, that's all different kinds of writing, whether it's writing music or writing stories, or concepts, or to stretch the definition of that word, writing art. But yeah, for me that's really a big part of who I am.

Matt: So how do you figure out, when press time for *Knives Out* is done, or another such moment comes along, how do you know what's next? Is it a matter of sort of listening to some internal interest or energy? Is it a matter of commerce, marketplace? Like whatever pays the bills next? You have these outlets, so it makes me wonder how do you know where to be obedient with your talents?

Nathan: I think the way that I've very purposefully set up my life is so that, is to enable me to take a job or take a project that connects with my artistic interests first. But I think there may be a handful of things, and I think where you get in trouble is if you start letting those get out of balance. And so for me, I think the two at the top of that list is the story, the material, what I was talking about before. Is this something that I'm excited about doing? Is this a movie I'd want to watch, or is this, if I'm directing a music video, is this a song that I would love to listen to? And then the second thing is the collaborative aspect. Do I love the person who's making this? And do I enjoy working with them, or does this feel like somebody that I think I would really enjoy working with?

And then the commerce thing is a very important thing, but I think the danger is that we can at times, what I'm trying to always protect is that that doesn't become the number one decision-making thing. You know that when I first came out to LA, I was working on *The Brothers Bloom*, and I remember a composer, like a seasoned composer, gave me the best piece of advice. He was like, man, when you come out here, don't buy a massive house. Hold yourself back from doing that, because if you do that, that will be the master. You will have to say yes to everything that comes along to feed that.

But I don't know, I think really what this is, is it comes down to figuring out what's actually important to you. If what's actually important is having a nice house, then definitely take that stuff. And that's not a bad thing. But I think if what is really important to you is community, then you want to set up your life so that you can say yes to the people that you love working with. If what's really important to you is artistry, then you want to set up your life so that you can say yes to the thing that you're excited about. If what's really important to you is critical acclaim, you want to set up your life so you can say yes to the thing that you feel like is going to be critically acclaimed. You know, whatever that thing is.

But I feel like we, and maybe this is just a western thing, but I think a hiccup in our thinking. When we think of payment, we think money is the only form of payment, and it's just really, really helpful for my mind to realize that there are a lot of different forms of payment, and money is not necessarily always going to be the most important one. And I think those change, depending on what you kind of need more of at a certain point. But there's a lot of other types of payment that can be very lucrative.

Matt: I love that. I love the reclamation of that word "payment" in more than just economic or transactional terms. But actually using that to say, hey, we're all paid in very different ways, from mental health to fulfillment to community, and so on.

Nathan: Yeah, totally. And I think again, kind of going back to where I started, it's really helpful to keep in mind that if you have almost no money, then that is going to be a very important form of payment. But if you're able to get to a place where you can pay your bills, and you can buy enough food for yourself, if you can resist the urge to scale up, then the amount of freedom that that brings is pretty phenomenal.

When people kind of ask me, "How do you break in?" I think in a really practical sense, the answer has to do with keeping your expenses as low as possible. So when we're doing this band project, early on in my

life, or when I'm scoring *Brick*, I had a half-time job that brought in enough to kind of cover my basic expenses, but at that point, my most valuable asset was time. And so it wasn't important for me to be living in a really nice place, or it wasn't even important for me to amass gear at that point. I recorded the whole score for *Brick* on a Powerbook with a single microphone.

All of this is this sort of instinctive balancing to enable this transition, where you can kind of have a half-time job that allows you enough time. Because we all know it's hard enough to make something new, but if you're trying to make something new at the end of a full day of work, at least for me, I get done with a day of work, and I can't dive into something new. So I need to, it's so, so crucial for me to carve out enough time to just kind of marinate in that.

[music]

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