

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 15

Sierra Hull interview – Episode Transcript

Sierra: So sometimes taking the advice of those around you actually can lead you more to your own true self, if you take that and analyze it in an honest way, if that makes sense.

[music/intro]

Matt: Welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner.

Jay: And my name is Jay Kirkpatrick.

Matt: And today we're talking with a very special guest; someone who's been under the bright lights since the age of ten. Jay, what were you doing at the age of 10?

Jay: I was playing Bulls vs. Blazers at my buddy's house [laughs] on Sega Genesis.

Matt: There you go. I was probably also riding a bike with training wheels. I don't know. What do ten-year-olds do? I don't know. Anyway, the reason I bring up what you were doing at 10 is because today's guest, Sierra Hull, was playing the Grand Ole Opry at that point. It just seems strange that someone could be playing country music's most sacred stage at such a young age. What's even crazier was that when I was talking to her, which you'll hear in just a second, she says she's actually lost count, at the age of 25, how many times she's played the Opry.

On top of all that, there are awards and album releases and whatnot. But what's really striking to me is that no matter what she's achieved, she said she still feels the same level of resistance that she ever has. What I thought would be so unrelatable, talking to someone who's achieved fame from when they were like playing the biggest stages and you and I were just playing in the neighborhood, she still wrestles with the same stuff that we all do.

Jay: I think it's so interesting to hear her, because she has been playing, what is it, since 10? She's 25? She's, I mean, if Alison Krauss called me, oh my, that's amazing. That's her first big was one of my favorite bluegrass and all-time, and the dangers of maybe getting too big for your britches, if you want to put it in Sierra Hull terms. And she seems so grounded. And she talks about having to battle with maybe, I would say, her ego, realizing she has stuff to learn. When you're at that level, I think that might be -- sometimes your biggest battle's against your own ego. She talked about that, and it feels like she's learned tons, and is growing, even as she's probably done more than most who are twice her age.

Matt: Yeah, she's really postured herself very well. I found myself learning a lot from the way that she positions herself toward the world to be excellent at her craft and yet be humble at the same time. You can hear all this and more in our conversation today with the award-winning and wonderful person, Sierra Hull.

Matt: I want to begin where we begin each of our episodes, and that is by reading just the opening lines from Steven Pressfield's work, *The War of Art*, which I already know that you said you're already familiar with. So this should be familiar terrain.

Sierra: Yeah, I've heard a lot of people talk about the book for years, and had read quotes and stuff, but finally read the book myself last year and really loved it.

Matt: Here we go. "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the unlive life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Sierra, on the verge of another album release, and just where

you're at in your career, I'm just curious what form resistance takes for you now after 25 trips around the sun. And what those battles resemble today.

Sierra: Yeah, well finally being done with this record definitely feels like I'm on the other side of it, but I certainly felt like I was going through a lot of hurdles, just trying to finish this record. As a touring musician, I spend probably 2/3 of the year traveling, and I'm gone. So trying to actually finish something in a reasonable amount of time can be difficult, just with how crazy the schedule gets. So I started working on this record in December of 2018, and I was working with Shani Gandhi, who's an amazing engineer here in Nashville as co-producer with myself. And doing this record, and we just had a great time working on it. But I kind of went into the project without really thinking too much beyond just making an album I wanted to make. I was trying not to worry too much about what everybody else would think about it.

So we turned in the record to the record label in April, I think it was. And basically the feedback we got was not the most exciting feedback. It wasn't really what we were hoping to hear. They liked the record, but they felt like, I think to quote them, they said it was an art record. It was an art record. So at the time, that was definitely a bummer to hear, because we worked so hard on this thing, and we're proud of this thing, and we turn it in. And it was either, we could go ahead and just put it out, or maybe go back to the drawing board. So I was like, okay.

They wanted to give me additional budget to go in and record a few more things, so I started thinking about that. I love recording, the opportunity to go back in and record even more. That part didn't bum me out at all, because I thought that's great. That gives us even more opportunity to record some stuff. So it really made me have to get down to business. And I wrote some more songs, because I wanted to make sure that whatever we added to it still didn't feel like we were changing the record in any way just to conform to what a record label wants it to be. Because that's not really me, as an artist, to do that. But instead, it was a good opportunity for me to kind of go, all right, maybe this record is a little one-dimensional in some ways, and there's an opportunity to add more of myself. So we went in, I wrote an instrumental, I recorded a few more things that lent themselves to my more acoustic, bluegrass roots. Because this is not a bluegrass record I made, by any means.

Matt: Oh.

Sierra: So I did some stripped-down guitar/vocal things. So all that, it was a frustrating process to have to kind of be delayed in having the record come out, and taking us 'til basically November of the same year to actually finish a product and have a real, complete record. I think in hindsight, the record's much better for having done that. So I'm really excited about the way it turned out, but it was definitely a little bit of an emotional bump to have to get over and go, okay. This is how this stuff goes sometimes, and I'm going to go back, and I'm going to put in the work, and put in the time to write, and to make sure this is something that we all can be excited about, including myself. Because I have to make sure that I like what I'm doing as much as anybody.

Matt: Sierra, can you take me back to April? So you work hard on an album, you turn it in, you clearly believe in it, it's from you, and a true expression of what you want to put out in the world. When they say it's an art record, and clearly are not enamored or not, at least in terms of the marketplace, they have some doubts. Whatever it was there. The response for you there. How do you move through that? How do you know whether not to take your ball and bat and go home? How do you know how much to give there versus hold true to what you initially came in with?

Sierra: Yeah, I had to do some serious soul-searching and say how much do I agree with what they're saying or how much do I feel like I should stand up and say, "Nope, this is what I did, and you should put

it out.” But you know, it’s not really in my nature to just think I’m right no matter what. So it’s like, I can always pause. Ultimately, I think I’m pretty good about remaining true to myself, and if there’s something that I feel like, no, I can’t do what this person is saying I need to do, because I believe this is my path or this is what I’m supposed to do. I can always choose that. I can always choose what I think I need to choose. But I’m also not so stubborn that I can’t go, hmm, well maybe I missed something here. Maybe they’re right about what a complete record looks like.

The main thing I was hearing from them was that they really thought, by an art record, they thought it was a great record but that it was a challenging listen for anyone that might not already know my music. So musically they thought that it was dense. Though I still go, okay I don’t think it was like that crazy. It’s not like I handed them a 45-minute symphony or anything like that. But I do understand, maybe for the average listener, there was some things that might, as a whole, be hard to take without some other things scattered in.

So with that in mind, I went, okay. I already had a lot of other music that I had written, that I had hoped I would get to record at some point. This happened to be the tracks that we chose to record, but by all means, that’s not the only thing I care about or love. So I definitely felt open to the idea of being able to go back in and rework some things, and add to what we already had. Plus, it was a fairly short record. I think the record was 32 minutes or something like that. So it was 11 tracks but a fairly short record. So there was room to add to what we already had.

So we really didn’t even have to do away with much of what we had originally. We just added more, if that makes sense, to kind of broaden the scope of the record. So it ended up being a really great opportunity to have more time to work on it and be able to kind of take a step back from myself as a listener and consider what someone else might hear when they listen to something.

I think sometimes as the composer of music or the person that’s actually creating the music, you can hear it from a different place from someone that has no perspective on the music might. So I think it’s important sometimes to zoom out a little, and perhaps we had zoomed in a little too much. [laughs]

Matt: I find that pretty rare, because I feel like most artists I talk to, I mean it’s obviously your baby, so to speak. It’s this vulnerable, fragile thing that you created, you believe in. It takes a certain level of courage to then put that out, and then to have – I guess generally the conversations I have with artists are pretty disdainful about the industry. They roll their eyes at the commerce part of all this.

Sierra: Yeah, it’s frustrating.

Matt: Okay, so yeah. I guess I just wonder for you how you maintain. Because you seem pretty positive about the commerce angle here, but then you just said that’s frustrating. So how do you navigate that? Has your attitude changed over time?

Sierra: I’ve never really made music from a commerce standpoint, really, and thinking about how that has to come first. Because I think it can be such a destroyer of creativity to lean too heavily on that thought. Is this going to sell? Is this going to be something? Furthermore, I’m a mandolin player-singer-songwriter. I’m not trying to be a pop star, or I should have probably been playing a different style of music from the get-go. So I still find that it’s important for me to try to, not ignore it, but because I am a little bit split-brain, in that I care about the business side of stuff. I think that’s important if you’re going to have a successful career. I do want to be able to reach as many people as possible. But at the end of the day, it can’t be at the sacrifice of making good music that I believe in. So I think that you have to still be able to kind of keep an eye on all that, while at the same time going, is what I’m doing honest and authentic to myself as an artist? And if it’s not, then you have a problem there. And I don’t think people

who chase success typically really find it. If you're trying to chase what's on the radio, and you're trying to just mimic that, for most people, I don't think that typically works out. I think that people, at least that I've admired, that really end up finding their path, is because they do the thing in their heart that they really love, and they try to go for that.

But at the same time, you can't be so stubborn about what you're doing that you can't ever take the advice from other people around you and at least hear what they're saying. And then you do with that as you see fit as an artist. You either choose to listen to those around you, and you go, okay, well maybe they have a point. Let me think about that. Let me zoom out of my own self and my own ego a little bit here and hear what they're saying. And what can I do with that? Is that something that if I were to apply that, I would feel like I'm still doing something true and honest to myself?

In this case, with this particular project, I felt like there was room to still go back to the drawing board, and there was something in that that at least excited me, though it was frustrating and disappointing in the moment, once I got beyond my initial disappointment with it all, the flame was fueled a little bit for me just to creatively go, okay, I've got plenty to offer here. I'm not going to let this one little thing of maybe this seems too dense or too much for the average listener to get, well I love a lot of simple music. I love a lot of straightforward things. And so, actually in hindsight, being able to go and incorporate, I feel like this album now has a bigger part of me in a more honest way than it even did to begin with. So sometimes taking the advice of those around you actually can lead you more to your own true self if you take that and analyze it in an honest way, if that makes sense.

Matt: Yeah, and I'm glad to hear you say that you've landed there, versus in a jaded position or remaining in that initial frustration. Sierra, I wanted to ask about the resistance from a different angle with you, because you're in such a rare position, and please tell me. I don't know if you get so tired of people bringing up how young you were when you got started in all this --

Sierra: [laughs] No, it's fine.

Matt: and that familiar story. But for those who don't know, you had your first record release at what, age 12? Is that right?

Sierra: Um....

Matt: Or 13?

Sierra: Well, so I put out a little solo project before I signed with Rounder Records. I put out a little instrumental project when I was about ten. I had been playing a couple of years. So it was this little self-release thing. I don't usually count that, but I did a little project, all instrumentals, traditional fiddle tunes, bluegrass fiddle tunes, but played on the mandolin, of course. And then I signed with Rounder when I was probably about 13, and my first record came out when I was 15 or 16, I think.

Matt: On Rounder.

Sierra: Yeah, it took me a few years to actually get started on it. I knew I was going to make a record, eventually. I think I was 16 when it came out.

Matt: Your first time at the Opry was...?

Sierra: I was 10 years old. I got to play with this guy named Mike Snider, who's been a longtime Opry member. He brought my brother and I on, on a Saturday night, and we got to open for him kind of locally

in Crossville, Tennessee, about an hour from where I grew up, at a show that he did. And my brother and I opened for him. He told the audience, “The next time you see these kids, they’ll be with me on the Grand Ole Opry.” So we were like, “Oh, whoa!” So he took us out and gave us our official debut, which was really special.

Matt: How many times have you played the Opry since then?

Sierra: You know, I was trying to find this, I just played a couple weeks ago, and I was thinking, man, I lost count, and I really want to know. So I have somebody at the Opry trying to figure that out for me currently. It’s not been an insane amount of times, but I’ve played probably a few times every year since then.

Matt: Yeah. Enough to have lost count.

Sierra: Enough to have lost count somehow, yeah. Which is shameful. You shouldn’t lose count of how many times you’ve played that place.

Matt: I love it. I bring this up because I think for so many people, resistance is about facing something you haven’t done before, and then having a fear of doing that thing, whatever it is, and then trying to summon the courage to do it.

Sierra: Yeah.

Matt: But for you, I wonder what resistance looks like for you in some ways that are different from others because your journey has been so different. That success has come early on. That you were playing a stage like the Ryman so early, and then now you’ve lost count. Does resistance look the same for you, and we just wouldn’t believe it if you tried to tell us?

Sierra: [laughs]

Matt: Yeah, having some of those early successes, and people surrounding you, telling you this is what you’re going to do, and then you do it. And accomplishing what you have, I guess I just wonder how you think that sort of youthful path has affected your larger scale relationship with resistance, or maybe what other kinds of resistance are present for you because of that.

Sierra: Well, I think it’s interesting, because I started so young that I know I was so excited to get to play the Opry at 10 years old, and to do some of the things I got to do early on, but I think as a little kid, I mean I knew from the time I was 8 years old and picked up the mandolin and started playing, that I wanted to do this for a living, as my life. I knew that was what I wanted to do. And I really never doubted that I could do it. And it wasn’t about thinking I was good. It didn’t really have anything to do with that. It’s like, I just knew I loved it. I loved it, and in my mind, why not? You’re a little kid. Why not? Of course I’m going to do that. And I was lucky to be encouraged by a lot of wonderful people along the way.

So I think you don’t have the same kind of resistance when you’re young like that. Especially if you’re nurtured and encouraged by those around you. I always had wonderful parents that encouraged me, but also didn’t over-encourage me. Definitely kept my feet on the ground. Definitely reminded me that if I wanted it, I needed to work hard. I remember my dad telling me when I was probably 11 or so, maybe even younger than that. Alison Krauss was one of my big heroes, and I remember I was getting a little lazy and wasn’t practicing as much. My dad said, “I noticed you haven’t been practicing as much lately. You really need to get to work, because if you want to do this like you say you do, and one of these days,

Alison Krauss is going to call you, and she's going to invite you to come play with her, and you're not going to be ready." So I was like, "Oh! Yeah, okay!"

So just like real encouragement, but also at the same time, in a way that I had somebody like that saying, "Hey, this is possible. This is actually going to happen. But it won't happen if you don't put the work in." Which was a good lesson to learn early on. It's changed for me as I've gotten older, that advice still remains true. I think about things that I'm doing or working on trying to accomplish now at this point in my career, the reminder of that hard work still matters. You still have to show up every day if you really want to see these things happen. I think it is different as you get older, because there is more self-doubt that creeps in. There're more things at play as an adult that you just don't think about as much as a little kid. I guess that's where it has changed the most.

Matt: You're working within this genre, and roots music and in particular, having such deep traditions and whatnot. That makes me wonder about what does resistance look like when trying to work within maybe a genre that has these pre-defined ideas of what true bluegrass really is, and how things should go, should be played. How to honor and pay tribute to what's gone before and yet obviously do what is uniquely suited to you as an artist and what you want to do. Do you find resistance there just because of the genre itself?

Sierra: Well I think I've been kind of lucky to in some ways break out of that and break out of any worry of that at this point. But I grew up a total bluegrass kid. I was going to bluegrass jams every weekend, and it's such a beautiful community to grow up in. There're all these traditional songs that everybody knows and loves. And you can show up on a jam session with 4 or 5 other people, and you may have never met before, but you can sit in a circle, and you can play the same tunes. You can sing the same songs. It's like everybody's kind of learning a lot of the same stuff, and that music is really handed down from generation to generation in that way. And I love that about it.

So I think that's why so many people really hold it in this kind of sacred way. They get nervous if somebody's trying to do other things, because I think they sometimes think that the music is going to die. But if you think about Bill Monroe, who's known as the father of bluegrass music, the guy that kind of, he's a mandolin player that started this kind of music that we kind of think of. And of course now the word "Bluegrass" means something different to everybody, because there's so many different sectors of bluegrass, from the real traditional to the super modern. I mean, that word kind of means a lot of different things at this point.

But if you really trace it back to Bill Monroe and the people who really seem to hold on to that style of things, to really honor Bill Monroe, you also have to honor the man himself. And the man himself was one of the truest innovators ever. He created this completely new genre of music. So I kind of think sometimes, you can love and appreciate his music, but how about the spirit in which he created that music? That came from a place of bravery and forward thinking, as a musician. So I think that was one of the things that frustrated me with turning my album in the first time, because I felt like there's some of the things on my new record, the instrumentation maybe isn't the most conventional instrumentation on some of the songs.

So therefore, maybe in some ways it doesn't fit into any particular genre. And I think that that scares people sometimes, because they don't know what to do with it. But I'm also finding that more and more, my generation and a younger generation, genre matters less and less. Because really, there's very thin walls between a lot of these different styles of music that we love and listen to. I personally love all kinds of music. And though I grew up in bluegrass, I certainly know that that's not the only musical influence that finds its way into my music if I'm really being true and honest to what's inside me. So I try to not worry about it too much. And thankfully, I feel like I've still been really embraced and welcomed by the

bluegrass community at large, even as I've sort of moved further and further away from the traditional sounds, as far as my own solo albums and personal shows go.

[music]

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