

## THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 18

### Zach Williams of The Lone Bellow – Episode Transcript

**Matt:** For those who are unaware of Steven Pressfield, Pressfield is an author of a book called *The War of Art*. It's actually sort of our source inspirational material for the podcast, so Zach I'd love just to read a couple lines and have you riff on that, and we'll see where it goes over the next few minutes. So Pressfield says this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the un-lived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Zach, I'd love to know for you, what form resistance is taking, on the verge of another album release, or even personally in other creative ways, whatever that strikes you.

**Zach:** I think some of my base levels, I struggle with people-pleasing, and that can be with my band, that can be during a show. It's something that I have to be aware of. So I think I needed to figure out some things going on inside me that would easily lead me to making something that I didn't want to make, once it was all said and done, and not getting carried away just in the process of creating the music. Every single sound that you record, every single emotion that you try to capture, it all can be tied back in to one thing in someone's soul. For me, that can easily be some sort of fear.

I started writing music in 2003, and it was a very cathartic thing. I was living down at this hospital called the Shepherd Center down in Atlanta. My wife had had this accident where she had broke her neck, and she was diagnosed a quadriplegic. I was going through the classes, just like how to bathe her and feed her and take care of her. My buddy Caleb that I mentioned was at the hospital with me a lot. And I started journaling. He was like, man, you should try to make these into something that you can sing, and learn how to play the guitar and sing at the same time, and just find an open mic close to the hospital and just see what happens. So that's what I started doing. I started having this beautiful experience where I would go down to this lame open mic at a Starbucks, and I would just bawl, crying, in front of a bunch of strangers. It was this pure, cathartic thing.

And then I moved to New York and started playing the bars, and all of a sudden, something that at first was so fundamental to a transition time in my life, and something that was so important to me, you start getting all these people around you that mean well, but they're like, "Hey, you should do this like this, and you should start thinking about a career in this. And you should change the way that you write." "You're writing choruses that are way too long," or "You try to stuff too much information in one song." All this stuff. And when you have these people-pleasing things inside you, it's really hard to start protecting those guttural feelings that led you in the first place. So that book really helped me kind of get back to this fundamental things that started me in music in the first place. It was beautiful. You can boil it all the way down to the way that I decided to deliver these songs.

It was so great working with Aaron Dessner again, because we already had such a strong working relationship, and friendship, and he was like, "Man, I've noticed in the past few records, you guys sing these big high notes all the time." He was like, "I'm clipping your wings. You're not going to do that this time, unless you absolutely have to or you're going to die." I was like, okay. So it reminded me almost of like, I'm not saying that I'm like Michael Jackson, but it reminded me of that documentary on... who was his producer? Was it Clive Davis?

**Matt:** Was it Quincy Jones?

**Zach:** Quincy Jones! Yeah. I watched this Quincy Jones documentary around the same time that I was reading *The War of Art*. When Quincy was making Michael's first solo record, he had him sing way lower on purpose. And I was like, whoa, that's really brave. Because Michael probably was always like, "I can hit these high notes. This is what separates me from other singers." So I felt like Aaron was doing that same thing with me, was like, "We're pulling you down here." It was scary. It still is scary. We haven't released the record yet, obviously.

**Matt:** Zach, you're talking about, "I have to work on my people-pleasing," and then here comes a person saying, "This is what we're going to do. I'm going to clip your wings." That could be an example of people-pleasing, someone like Aaron.

**Zach:** I already wanted to do it. I already had something inside me that was like, show after show after show, you sing these songs that you love, but you have these big moments in the vocals, where it's like, all right, this is the part where I've gotta give the audience what they want. I've gotta hit this ungodly high note and do this. And so for me, when I went in to make this new record, I already wanted to do something fresh. Something different. Just for my personal journey. So I immediately, even though it scared me when he said it, I really clicked. I was like, I know exactly what you're talking about. I want to do that, too.

**Matt:** So it wasn't some out-of-the-blue, pleasing someone's random thing. There's an internal compass that affirmed what he's saying.

**Zach:** Yeah. I wrestled with it for a couple weeks while we were up there, and while we were recording a song, I would wander in with a cup of coffee and be like, "Man, Aaron, are you sure this is the right key? Are you sure we shouldn't raise it? I don't know." And he was just like, "I'm sure, man." And since we had already worked together before, and I knew the kind of things that made him tick, creatively, I just already had that trust where I felt like he was trying to pull something out of me that I needed help with. And Brian and Kanene felt the same way. They were like, "Whoa. Okay. That's kind of our bread and butter. That's what we do." And he was like, "No. Not this time." And we all wrestled with it. And after we started living with the songs for a couple weeks in the studio, and really getting down to it, a song started making us feel a different way than I think if we would have changed the keys. He ended up pulling another type of emotion out of us.

**Matt:** What is that emotion?

**Zach:** Well, for us, I've said in interviews before, we have this pretty thick material in our lyrics, and we usually just hide it in the way we sing, and we hide it in the instrumentation. For instance, there is a song called Time's Always Leaving that we did, and when it was just a poem, and you're just reading the words, you can tell that it's me being afraid of dying. But when you put a four on the floor back beat on it, and you put a big screaming guitar, and you put it up to B minor and I'm singing my face off, it's like, "Whoa! This is a fun song! This should be the single!" And it's like, yeah but you should listen to the words, because you know, they're... So this time, we wanted to make music that matched the lyrics, instead of doing the old country move, where let's say Johnny Cash, Cry, Cry, Cry. You've got that really simple [sings song intro], and then it's just like this train going kind of beat. But if you ever sit down and read the words, it's like this person was not in a healthy relationship on either side. This is like no bueno.

**Matt:** You said you needed a couple weeks in trusting Aaron, leaning into that trust. Was there a turning point, when you're listening to something in the mix, when you're in the studio, where suddenly you realize, "I get it, and I like it"?

**Zach:** Yeah, I can remember the exact moment. The turning point, so the way we recorded this record was we did all of the vocals first, and we picked the tempo according to how we wanted to sing the words. So we did vocals before we even did drums. We've never done that before. Usually we do drums and bass first, and then we lay on top of that. We wanted to do it different this time. So this time, when the three-part harmony started matching with the stuff that Josh Kaufman was doing on guitar with JT Bates on the drums and his super weird, beautiful way of drumming, that's when the glue started

happening. When the vocals weren't just sitting alone, when they were with this other instrumentation, I was like, okay. Now we're getting somewhere.

**Matt:** You know, with the shift in maybe sound or – earlier you called it your bread and butter. And I just thought, yeah that's it. That's your hallmark. These great choruses with the harmonies that just overwhelm you. I'm a big fan of those songs. I'm assuming I'm hardly the only one. So in that way, is there any worry on your part about the response to an album like this that is a curveball? Are you kind of over that, having been through several albums?

**Zach:** So really, that book really helped me with that exact thing. I think it's so easy to go in making a record, thinking about, what are people going to say when they hear the record? And I'm just sick of it. It's not how I started making music. It's something that happens, I think, to everyone along the way. I was listening to this beautiful, Malcolm Gladwell does this podcast called Broken Record. And he interviewed the guy from Vampire Weekend. Again, I was like a month out from making the record. And I listened to that interview. And that interview, they recorded it like 6 months before his record came out. He was just talking about how he's wrestled with that.

You don't realize how much you worry about how much what people say about music. And it's not even that it's tied in with how well the record might do, if it helps you sell more tickets to live shows or whatever. It's just this terrible fear that can come over you. Man, I don't want any bad reviews. I want to make everybody happy. And I think that I needed to process that fear before I went into the studio this time. And I'm glad I did. I'm not saying that I'm totally over it or anything. But just, hearing that interview was huge for me. It's just little things like that. You hear these other artists talk about the same struggle. And then reading this book and it's like, whoa, resistance lives all around us, and we're literally trying to press against it on purpose.

**Matt:** Zach, do you find that, what you're talking about some of these fears, I find in my own life, if I follow those fears to the conclusion, okay what if some of the reviews are bad? What if a certain percentage of the audience doesn't like this particular turn, or sometimes I find if I follow those fears to their logical conclusion, it reduces their power, because I realize, oh okay. Then it happens. Then that's the worst thing, I guess the fear itself is larger than the actual manifestation of the end of that fear.

**Zach:** Absolutely. And I mean I think one thing I want to point out, there are these huge, beautiful choruses and vocal parts on this record. And the only way those made it on the record, they had to fight for their life to make it on the record, whereas before, they were the foundation for making a record. So I'm excited about that. I feel like they had to fight to be there. So it's not that they're not there. We just didn't lean on them. They only happened if they happened naturally. There was just nothing else we wanted to do.

But to get back to your point, yeah, absolutely. I remember on the last record, I got some terrible review by some really big paper. And I think it was the first time we ever got like an “ouch, that really hurt” kind of review. And I remember I was so pissed. I felt so misunderstood. I was like, “No! I want to call that guy and clarify, that's what that song's about! You have no idea what you're talking about!” And I put all those visuals of people walking throughout the record on purpose, and it wasn't, yeah, I wanted to do all this stuff, and then a couple days in, I was like, no. I want to spend my time doing something else. I'm not going to reverse this train. I think that goes along with what you were saying.

**Matt:** Zach, I want to back up just real fast. You mentioned at the start of the show that really just the main resistance for you is about people-pleasing. And you led with the band as the example. You said, I struggle with people-pleasing, even with the band, and then you listed some other areas. And I thought that was a really interesting point to make, that even within the trio, there are issues of people-pleasing.

Because I would think that would be a good thing. Within the band there are these exchanges, and we compromise on what we want. And of course I'm sure that's at work, but you're also, it seems like there's the good side that you would identify, but maybe also the shadow side of people-pleasing, even within this intimate, known group that has worked together to create these great albums. What were you identifying there that's negative?

**Zach:** So when you're in a band, and you're with people all the time, I like for everybody to just be content and happy and thriving. So sometimes I just don't push back, or sometimes someone will write something, and they're having a bad day, so you're just like, "Yeah, okay." But it sucked. But then you get to the studio, and they're like, "I want to record that song." And it's really hard to be like, "Why?" And then you have to fight with why, and then you go back and forth with "I don't think it lines up with the vision of this record" or "I don't get it. The song doesn't make any sense to me. It doesn't do anything for me." And that's really difficult saying those kinds of things to your best friends. Especially when it's what you've dedicated your life's work to.

I think Kanene said it really well. When we were doing the write-up for this new record, I can't quote her verbatim, but she said something like, "These songs were well fought for. The ones that lost needed to lose, and the ones that won needed to win. Like me and Brian were having shouting matches, just screaming at each other about ways that melodies should go. There's a song called Martingales. We were just like screaming back and forth with each other. Super pissed. But the song ended up being better because of that.

**Matt:** Hey, by the way, you were mentioning Martingales. If you're yelling, he's yelling, does Kanene play the role of mediator there? Does Aaron?

**Zach:** She wasn't there for that one. That one happened like a year before we made the record. I don't know, I mean sometimes it's me and Kanene. We all fight with each other when we're making stuff. Sometimes it's like lightning in a bottle, and it's like bam, and you're crying at the end of writing a song. You're like, that is it. That's exactly it. Other times, you're questioning each other's abilities.

**Matt:** Can you finish your Martingales story? How did you end that particular song?

**Zach:** You know, we started with this idea, where Brian heard some lady in a restaurant say to this stranger, "If yesterday's too heavy, put it down." And Brian was like, "Ooh, I really like that." And he came in with this chorus idea. And I was at this other place. I was working on this completely different poetry about pink flamingoes, and pink flamingoes wearing Martingales. And Martingales were these things that people put on show horses to make their necks arch down. And how a pink flamingo's neck is already arched, and all the things that people do to themselves that they don't need to do. Like they're beautiful anyway, kind of thing. We decided to fit these two ideas together, and the process of that, yeah he was just like, "What on earth are you talking about?" And I was like, "It's visual! It's how my brain works!"

And we were at the end of a three-week European tour at some super crappy, weird AirBnB, pouring down rain in London. We were just like, "Ahhhhh!" We started working on it, and Brian was like, "Man, I've always wanted to write a song that had that like Free Willy vibe." And I was like, "Yeah, man, that piano part." And then the music of it started relaxing the lyric writing of it. And we were like, I like singing this. So we didn't kill each other. I mean, he's a lot larger than me. He could take me out pretty quick. Yeah. Yeah. We've known that since we were 18 years old. Brian would win. But thankfully he's just a big, kind, polar bear.