

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.10

Glen Phillips interview – Episode Transcript

Glen: That's the odd career thing, is I'm trying to not have a career. I'm trying to have a life at this point. But I want to have a life where I make a lot of music.

[intro 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.

Speaking with Glen Phillips about what he's learned over the years is a bit like drinking from the proverbial fire hose. That's an expected outcome, given that Phillips has been writing and recording since he was a teenager, with Toad the Wet Sprocket. Thirty years later, and now a solo artist, Glen has a lot to say about the resistance, especially since he's experienced it at so many different stages of the creative life.

These days, the resistance might have him descend into well-worn patterns of self-loathing. But more than anything, Glen says he's learning to be kind to himself: to have compassion, even at his most frustrating moments when he's undisciplined or unable to focus. While Glen jokes that he peaked at 23 and was “over,” commercially speaking, at the age of 26, the reality is that the singer-songwriter has crafted a stunning solo catalog that stands taller than his band's own chart-topping work.

It's the result of nurturing his own internal soil over the years, with space, with community, and with a shift away from commercial demands altogether. In this episode, we sit down for a career-spanning conversation with an artist who has much to say about the opposing forces not only at work against our creativity, but against our growth as persons, as well.

[music]

Matt: Glen, how are you today?

Glen: I'm doing great, thank you. Hello.

Matt: Hey, we appreciate you joining us and talking about the resistance. I know that you've read the book which was sort of the inspired material for the podcast, as we were talking earlier. But I just want to reread a bit of this, just to get our conversation going. The author is Steven Pressfield, from the book *The War of Art*. Glen, you said you've given a few copies of this away in your artistic career.

Glen: Yeah, I've recommended it to a lot of people, and I tend to find books I like and buy them for people. More than once.

Matt: Let me spur the conversation by what Pressfield says here. He just says, “Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the unlive life within us. Between the two stands resistance.” I’ve been reading that just to open this whole first season of the podcast to get us going. And I just wonder kind of where you’re at in your career and the amount of experience you have. Where you kind of sit with that quote.

Glen: Well, I mean, I’ve had a period of kind of pretty intense life change over the last 4 years. I was married, was with my wife for 25 years, two of our kids out of the three moved away, went to college. Went from California to New York and Colorado. My youngest is going to move out in a year. So you know it’s been a huge shift in my life. And being in Santa Barbara, too, and trying to figure out -- housing is expensive here. And I used to have a studio, and it’s, having your place to go and on the one hand, there are excuses that I think we can build about like oh if I just have this particular container, then I can do my work. But there are certain things that make a big difference.

I was going to move into a place that was going to be really great for working, and then the landslides hit last year, and so the debris flow in Santa Barbara, so Montecita, the place I was moving in turned into a mud field. So I was in yurts for a good 8 months. And living in a yurt is really great. It’s very small. I’ve gotten rid of a lot of stuff. I like that I can live without a lot of extra baggage in my life. At the same time, yurts are fantastically un-sound-proof. The place I was living in, there’s now, they were framing a house right next to it for the last couple months, and it got to the point where it just, 7 AM it’s like there’s a crew there with radios blaring. I can’t do anything creatively in that environment.

So I finally moved myself, got an apartment and just took a big swallow and spent the money on Santa Barbara rent and have a really quiet place. The first place I found. I said, well I need it quiet during the day. The landlady said, well it used to be a recording studio. I think that’ll do great. It’s got these nice thick walls. It’s just silent during the day.

As much as I can make, there’s trying to find out, what’s resistance? What’s the part of me that says, “Oh, I’ll start writing when...” And what’s the other part that it’s like, actually you can’t if you’re in the middle of a construction site. It’s really a bad place for songwriting. It just doesn’t function. So it’s been good to get there and kind of have an environment that’s more conducive and now be back, rather than have this larger situational barrier. Now it’s just all my old excuses coming back to haunt me. That wasn’t exactly the question you asked.

And a strange thing for me has been in the last few years, I’ve gotten, I have kind of a meditation group where music is very central to it, and out of that, I’ve started teaching community singing circles. And doing this non-performative musical modality where we’re singing. It’s a lot of lyrics by Hafiz or Rumi and these kind of simple, repetitive songs. I mean, in some ways it’s kind of like Kirtan music, where it’s just a few things that can be learned really quickly, but they’re just difficult enough that they engage the mind, and it’s not performance-oriented.

So I’m leading these drop-in choirs. And it’s not about singing and being seen. It’s about just the act of singing together. And a lot of the people are people who have been told they can’t sing.

And they're kind of reclaiming that part of themselves. And it's completely outside of this professional world that I have inhabited. And I love it.

I've been wondering for years, how do we return to a relationship with music that's the opposite of American Idol? That's not about being the start and being seen. It's about being part of something larger. So it's been hard for me to write pop songs. I'm supposed to come up with an album, and I've been not wanting to write anything in that modality.

And so I finally have this space, and I'm trying to give myself a set of prompts and show up regularly. And I've started by recording more than writing. But yeah, it's been a funny process for me. Because it's supposed to be my job, and I've been wanting to do all these things that don't really make much, if any, money that are just such good food for the soul. Because if you do what you love for a living, on the one hand it's the best gift ever. It's the perfect life. On the other hand, if you do what you love for a living, and it's not working out financially very well, or you're seeing, it's being difficult to put your stuff out in the world, it can kind of mess up your love for this thing you do.

And for awhile, I think it's an adjustment for any musician is going, okay. I had my heyday. I was at my most popular. I peaked at probably 23, which is my daughter's age, my oldest daughter. I had my largest commercial success by 23, and I was, in a commercial sense that anyone would notice, I was over by 27, 26. So how do you kind of reconcile? It's like, okay. I still feel like, I don't want to live in the past. I'm not full of a sense of nostalgia for my own career. So how do I keep writing and staying relevant? So for me it's this matter of no longer trying to think in terms of career, and it's weird trying to figure out, how do I put out music and be inspired to do it while being as removed from any idea of commercial success as possible?

The music industry in particular has changed so much. We're still touring around playing live with boxes full of compact discs. People don't even have compact disc players anymore. We are selling, at least when you get a book on kindle, you still buy it, right? Nobody buys music anymore. You're competing for playlists. I don't even want to know about that stuff. So it's a strange world to go, huh. I used to make a living selling music. Now everybody's on tour, because it's the only way to make anything. But how do you even let people know? Even social media, which eats up such a huge portion of my soul if I give it any weight in my life, I really don't like what it takes away from me. But can you be a musician without social media anymore? I don't even, so it's a really weird world right now.

And a huge part of me just wants to go, okay. I guess I need to be really comfortable with obscurity. And maybe I just put out a lot more music to a lot less people and just don't think about success in any terms that I ever thought about it before. It's all got to be about the work I do. Yeah, it's strange. I finally realize it's not personal. And for years it felt personal. So that's the odd career thing, is I'm trying to not have a career. I'm trying to have a life at this point. But I want to have a life where I make a lot of music.

Matt: You opened a few doors I'd like to walk in.

Glen: Yeah, that was a lot of word salad in there.

Matt: That's totally fine. I do just want to backtrack a bit. Because you were talking about – basically, you said the career can't be the impulse. So I guess I wonder what does become the impulse. I'm glad you brought up the singing circles, because I've seen those, where you put them out there, as an event coming up that you're doing. I wondered about that. Is that a good example of maybe the new impulse, where you're sort of following, that's where the energy is for you, so to speak?

Glen: Yeah. The first year that I was leading singing circles, I didn't put out anything publicly. I had a mailing list of friends. It was word of mouth. I wasn't taking any money at all until people started asking. And then I didn't keep any of it. We made everything charity donations for the first year. We had just had the landslides, so we were donating to the Santa Barbara relief foundation. Santa Barbara Foundation Relief Fund, or the Bucket Brigade, or Doctors Without Walls, which does medicine for homeless people out here.

I wanted to do something that was all an offering. And not confuse it with, I don't know, livelihood. Because having success early in life can really mess you up. Because you feel entitled to it. [laughs] So it felt really great to just do something that was all about other people and my soul. And I've slowly managed to allow, after a year, I said, okay I'm going to take the money now. Is that okay? Am I still a good person?

It's not much. I make more playing a show. But I get to do it at home, and it really, the thing with this kind of singing is, most people don't even know it exists. And when they discover it, it's not for everybody, but there are a lot of people who just basically say they didn't know they were missing it. And they can't live without it now. It's that thing, if you went to church as a kid, and you remember the singing together, but you have a faith that is different now, or don't have a faith at all, and don't want to have to have a dogmatic buy-in to have that experience, you can get together and sing these spiritual songs that don't require any belief system. They just require showing up and being together. It's really good medicine. I think every culture that's ever been has made music together. It's only recently that we've professionalized it. And having an opportunity to do that together I think just brings us back to our humanity.

My friend Lisa Littlebird, who I learned this stuff from, talks about wanting to make it as popular as yoga. Just so that if people are, in the same way, people are at this point. And it wasn't this way 20 years ago, where your average American will say, "I feel kind of, I don't feel like I'm in my body enough. I feel a little disconnected. I'm going to go to a yoga class, settle in and mellow out." In the same way, if somebody goes, "I feel lonely. I feel disconnected. I feel like I just want to sit in some beauty and appreciation. I think I'll go sing. I need a good sing today." It's something I think our bodies and minds actually require. I think it's that important. It's been a lovely thing to bring that to people.

And it's made me, I think I'm intimidated creatively by it, because I would like, in the music that I put out on my regular albums, to include a degree of inclusiveness. And there's a way to compose for that. There's a way of writing songs that's a little more simple, that there's some elegance to it. Rather than thinking of it as dumbing down, I think of it as elegance and essence. So writing songs that invite people to sing along more quickly. And there was a period where I

was writing the Winter Pays For Summer album. There are these songs like “Thankful,” where I would cram as many scientific or literary references as I could, as many key changes. Everything was like, “Look at my brain! I’ve got a giant brain! It’s amazing! Look at my brain!” And some of those songs are great, but they’re not something where somebody can just pick up a guitar and start playing along, or where somebody can sing along on the first chorus.

So I want to write songs that invite people to sing, like where by the second chorus, you know how it goes. And that’s really exciting to me. Because I like the idea, if I can’t afford to tour with a band, I can at least afford to write songs where the audience becomes the band. And the more I do that, the happier I get on tour. I have a few songs, there’s a song called Held Up from the last record, where I don’t have a guitar. I just stomp and clap and sing. And it’s amazing to see what it does to an audience. To suddenly be in an acoustic show. You’re used to sitting there and eating your dinner while you watch, and it’s all very nice. But all of a sudden, people are singing, clapping, I want more of that.

Matt: Are you completely over that, by the way? You talked earlier about, I’m trying to cram in, look at my intelligence. But in a way, it still sounded like there was a bit of, that it’s painful to put away the cleverness. It’s painful to maybe, do you feel like you’re fully over that?

Glen: Um, no. I mean, old habits die hard. I like cleverness. I like humor. When I’m writing more, I end up doing really silly things. I don’t know if it’s terrible or wonderful. I did a version of Little Bunny Foo Foo years ago, on my laptop, just this Little Bunny Foo Foo almost as a Red Hot Chili Peppers song.

Matt: File that under things under Things I Didn’t Think You’d Say.

Glen: Yeah. I don’t know why. I even put it up online. I mean, it is dumb. And it is so fun to do. I have a silly side. And I mean, I did a record called Remote Tree Children with my friend John Askew that’s completely letting our nerd flags fly. I mean it’s a ridiculous piece. There’s like 3 songs based on Radiolab podcasts. There’s a song about gold farming. Do you know gold farming? Which was this –

Matt: I do not.

Glen: There were people in China professionally playing World of Warcraft. They would do repetitive tasks to build up gold, which took a lot of time to do, and then American players would trade real money for fake World of Warcraft gold so that they could buy bigger swords and more spells.

Matt: Like, literally time is money.

Glen: Time is money, and people were living in these bunkhouses, where it’d be a bunch of 18-25 year olds, living like 8 to a room, and playing World of Warcraft full time.

Matt: Wow.

Glen: And it's this song about a World of Warcraft player telling the American player, you know, I could actually kick your ass in a fair fight. You're a twink. I don't know why I researched all of this World of Warcraft. And so I wrote and did an album that was called Secrets of the New Explorers which was all about privatized space travel, that includes a fairly scientifically accurate song about space elevators that was – I got friends at NASA because of that album. If you joined, there was a period where if you joined the National Space Elevator Consortium, as part of your membership packet, you would get a copy of my record along with your subscription to Elevate Magazine.

So I mean, I love nerding out. And I made that record. There was part of me that thought, maybe NPR will like me, finally. Maybe they'll think I'm relevant now that I've done the nerdiest album ever recorded. And they didn't. They didn't notice it at all. But NASA did. So that makes me happy.

There's this part of me that wants my, because I was an artistic kid. My dad was a physicist. I remember him trying to explain quantum mechanics to me. When he tried to explain that, and he tried to explain calculus, and I got glazed over, it's like the only time he ever looked disappointed in me. And so I think there's part of me trying to impress my father now that he's passed away. My father and his ghost, I'm trying to be nerdy enough that he'd approve of me. So there's a part of me that just loves doing that. And there's also a part of me that just also, since I have discovered I don't have to be clever. I don't have to write in that modality. And it doesn't mean I stop, right? Because you start doing one thing doesn't mean, I mean there's time, but creativity is essentially polyamorous.

The difficulty in polyamory is not that people have a limited amount of love to give. It's that they have a limited amount of time and attention. And you can love as much as you want, creatively. You can have as many creative ideas as you want. But you only have a certain amount of hours in the day.

So if you're putting your attention into learning how to produce and record and arrange, you're going to give up time you could have writing something else. If you're writing songs all day long, you're not going to be writing poetry or prose all day long. You've got to choose. And I have had a little bit of a tendency to go wherever my current, whatever's new and sparkly. I don't know why I'm using all these poly- things, but they talk about new-relationship energy. It's the, you meet somebody new, and it's the most exciting thing there is, because it's new. And I will creatively go to that instead of just doing my, going deeper into what I'm already working on.

But I think also, that's fine. It means I can do a summer tour with Toad the Wet Sprocket, do the old band, make that audience happy, and when I'm done with that, because that's just a month and a half of my year, two months of my year, I get to go back and do my song circles. And I'm so ecstatic about that. And then when I'm doing my song circles, I start to get excited about recording new songs for a solo record or doing another side project with John or one of my nerdier things.

So I like that I can kind of jump from one of these things to the other. But that wasn't your question. Your question was about the simplicity. And so for me, part of it's taking my advice when I'm teaching songwriting or mentoring somebody, which I would like to do more of. I don't do enough. Because I have to get in a better state to do that. I have to teach not, do as I say, not as I always do. And when I've known people who just got a new publisher, they're trying to write pop songs, and I'm trying to talk to them about, just write good songs. Don't try to write hits. God, you'll fail if you try to follow Drake. That's not your job. You're not Drake. He's already doing that. Write you.

I've had friends where their management is telling them, "No, you've got to dumb it down. You've got to dumb it down." And I just hate that idea of dumbing down. Like Bob Marley wasn't dumbing down. Bob Marley was refraining. And those songs are bright and true and elegant. And it's not dumb. It's refined. It's precise and to the point and economical. And thinking of it in those ways makes it, it's why he's brilliant. He's saying something that's true, and he's being bold and brave about that truth. He's not running away from it. He's not trying to hide it under cleverness. His metaphors are elegant. And there is simplicity in that, but it's not because there's not a massive sophistication operating underneath it.

I talk about, I have difficulty writing happy songs, and that's one of the reasons I idolize certain periods of Van Morrison, that Astral Weeks and it's like, you go back and he's writing these songs that are just so joyous. And they're not lightweight. Somehow he manages to write these songs that are, and It Stoned Me, that are just, they're so evocative, and they take you into such a beautiful place, and they're, I don't know. It never feels light. It never feels like he's ignoring how complex life really is. He's doing some Mary Oliver trick of like all the darkness is still there in the background, even though it's just talking about how light dances.

My divorce got me really into David Whyte and Mary Oliver and Pema Chodron and Martin Prechtel and even Stephen Jenkinson. That was how I wrote my last record. I was reading them. Because that was the stuff I needed to survive as my old life ceased to exist.

Matt: And you even wrote a song directly from Prechtel, "Grief and Praise." When you're in a season like that – I want to shift gears, because when you're in a season like that, going through so much, the last album was very personal. But I wanted to ask you, is there ever a moment that's too personal for you? Like does the cutting room floor sort of hold a line? Or are you just all there?

Glen: Uh, there's some stuff that's not necessarily too personal, but I don't think it's going to do anybody much good. Meaning, I wrote some breakup songs that no one needs to hear, because we've all heard them too much, that are entitled and petty and blamey. And that's not – the more I think of music as a tool, and there is something to be said for writing those songs because they're universal. And a person doesn't want to feel like they're the only person to have felt this thing. But I do feel increasingly there is, I like to write something that's a tool for me and can therefore be a tool for somebody else to invest in their higher self, without denying all their other places.

So wallowing doesn't get me very far forward. And there's songs on that album, and we can talk about prompts in a minute. There are a lot of songs on that album that are coming from prompts. I was going to do a total spiritual bypass. I wanted to write a happy, upbeat song. I didn't want to write anything about what I was going through. I had really severe writer's block.

My friend, Natalia Zuckerman, suggested that I join this writing group that Matt the Electrician has from time to time. And he sends out, he just goes through a dictionary and looks at words and comes up with a title every week. And sends out an email on a Wednesday, and then the next Wednesday, there were like 18 of us. There are 18 songs with that title. And it's just a way of getting out of resistance, right? That you write a song a week. It doesn't have to be good. You don't have to do a great recording. These were good songwriters. And you're responsible to other people. If you don't write the song, he just drops you from the list. And I've been dropped a few times. I should probably actually write him and see if he's still doing it.

Matt: Because maybe you've been dropped?

Glen: Oh, no. I was dropped. I've been dropped a couple times. But I'll start touring or get really busy and then I'll stop and then he just drops you, and it's fine. And sometimes he's too busy and can't keep it going. But in the middle of my writer's block, he sent this title, and I think the first title I got from him was Reconstructing the Diary. And I picked up a ukulele, and I wrote that song in less than an hour. Like 45 minutes. And I had the title. And the title, it just allowed me to write something that was true in a general sense, but because the title wasn't mine, it wasn't about me, I could just write something. And it happened to be relevant.

So a lot of these songs, they kind of feel intensely autobiographical, but they're fictionalized. It's the same thing you do if you're a novelist. If you write the story of your own breakup, it's a memoir. Or if you're writing, trying to think what the, a simple plan? A modest? It's not A Modest Proposal. Have you ever read Oe? Kenzaburo Oe?

Matt: No.

Glen: And he writes this book. He has, he's an amazing writer. And he wrote a book. He has a son who was born, you know like, special needs, with some deformities and kind of mentally handicapped. And he wrote this book, which was basically his nightmare scenario of this father who wants to have the baby aborted and wants to run away. It's this beautiful and harrowing and intensely painful book. And the protagonist in it is just, it's so hard, because he is so deeply rejecting this responsibility that's come into his life. And as a father, Kenzaburo Oe deeply loves his boy, lives for his boy. And the book is the nightmare scenario. The book is him doing all the things that were his worst instinct.

I mean, another person who does some of this in writing, if you listen to Lorraine McKenna, and she's known now for having these huge hits. She wrote Girl Crush, and she wrote, what was the big song that Tim McGraw did, Humble and Kind. But her early albums, they're these worst-case scenarios. They're all about leaving her husband. She started writing songs, I think in her 30s. She had five kids. Her husband worked for the electric company, and she started writing these songs about breakups, and like if you're going to leave me, make every word hurt. And like

affairs. And she just put all her nightmare scenarios about her relationship into her songs. And they're so good. And so you know you can fictionalize, and it doesn't mean it's not really true. And it gives you an opportunity to go into a darker place and really explore it without having to necessarily do that in real life.

So there are a few songs. The song Leaving Old Town was another prompt from Matt. And there it was in the title. It was just about putting everything behind me. There was this urge to go, you take all the friends. You take the house. You take everything. I'll just go. I'll go by myself and, you know, this wintry, cold, sacrificial kind of feelings, that loneliness. And I will say, in my divorce, my ex was never cruel, was never unkind. She knew we were done before I did. And I was never asked. None of our friends ever tried to split up between us. They never tried to take sides. And I felt good that she and I pretty much told the same story. That our friends were like, huh. You're not telling me different, we weren't fictionalizing and telling wildly different tales to the people we love.

Which isn't to say it wasn't the most painful experience of my entire life. Probably death of parents comes close. It's the most painful experience you can ever go through. Especially if there's deep love still there. And so yeah, getting to write those songs. And there's songs like Go, which was inspired by a podcast which I can't find, actually. This podcast was doing this thing on, it was like, I think it was Strangers, but she had a guest podcaster, and I haven't found it. And it was talking about lighthouses as this style of love that was about loving something by letting it go. Mostly we say, "I love you, come close." But the lighthouse says, "I love you. Stay away. Don't come near. It's really not good for you."

And that song has this really specific imagery in it. At the same time, that was written with this guy, Kris Orłowski, who came in, and he just had this one line. It was, "You know which way to go." And he had the basic melody of the verse. And this line, "You know which way to go." I had just heard that podcast. I was, brought in that lighthouse imagery. And actually, I wrote a whole other part. I added the line, "I love you, now go." I think after the fact, he recorded a version of the song that doesn't have some of the parts that mine does. And that song, I felt in some ways, it was inhabiting my ex-wife's perspective of trying to let me go with love. And I was in a relationship immediately after, where I knew I wasn't falling in love, but was having the same experience of, I had a lover after we broke up, and I was like, oh. I'm not ready. I can't commit. I can't d

o this to somebody again. I was stepping away, too, and it was giving me this compassion. It's the amazing thing in life, is if you keep your eyes open, it lets you play every character. You think you're on one side of a narrative, and all of a sudden, you're on the other side. If you can look at that, and it can give you more compassion for, you know, god. I'm this role now? I thought she had it easy. This part's hard. Breaking up with somebody is just as, it's even worse than being broken up with. And so it's beautiful.

Matt: That song is actually what prompted me to ask about songs being too personal. Because these lines are just so, you know like, "I'm still dreaming of your eyes, your mouth, your touch. But I won't have another wreck on my watch." And then you said that line, which was so – I love that line, where you say, "And you, you know which way to go," that you said Kris brought to the mix.

Glen: Yeah.

Matt: It just feels...the imagery works. It feels very personal. It feels like you're just inhabiting that space with you as a songwriter, and it just made me wonder how, yeah, the difficulty of those.

Glen: But that's how truth comes through. Because I have sung that line, and I have thought of my ex-wife. I have thought of my ex-lover. I thought of being on the other side of that, and having somebody look at me and say that. We are every one of these aspects. That's the thing about being human. We're not one thing. We're certainly not just one thing at one time. And if our perspective goes broad enough, it can get fairly psychedelic. Into just where we are just a fractal node of complexity and emergence. That is all we are.

We are, in the universe where the majority of mass isn't even something we can detect, right? And we're nothing new. Everything we've felt, every little heartbreak. Every bit of joy or happiness is, on the one hand unique to us, and just another human being feeling and thinking and being and art, that's why it works. So there's this specificity in yeah, your eyes, your mouth, and I have sung that line in so many times from so many different perspectives. It's not just one thing. And my ability to be able to inhabit that song from a number of positions, from a number of perspectives, is what makes it work for me. It's like a combination of specificity and generality. And for me, that's when I'm writing at my best. And so taking this thing that, yeah, it's not just one thing. It's not about one relationship. It actually switches. I'm referencing the parts of it that are maybe slightly more personal. They skip around a lot. But they're all true.

[theme music]

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[music]

Matt: Join us for our next episode: a conversation with Grammy-winning artist, Fantastic Negrito.