

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.1

Stephen Kellogg interview - Episode Transcript

Stephen Kellogg: Art isn't a competition. Life isn't a competition. We all have our own road to walk, and the way that we walk that, and what we see when we look in the mirror, really is the only metric that matters.

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Matt Conner: Welcome to The Resistance, a podcast that features honest discussion with meaningful artists about the opposing forces that we all face when moving toward our better selves. I'm your host, Matt Conner.

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Matt: It's hard enough for any of us to find our authentic self. Some of us won't even bother searching for it in the first place, as we become aware of the sheer amount of work it takes to sift through everything that surrounds it. For those of us who lean into the work, it's a lifelong journey to learn who we are and to own that with any real degree of confidence.

The journey becomes that much more difficult when you're an artist in the spotlight, like Stephen Kellogg. Even after decades of making music, the singer-songwriter says he's just now finding his authentic self as a musician. On the surface, it sounds silly, until you consider the hard work it takes for any of us. And that steep climb is even more treacherous when dealing with the pressures of public demands.

Stephen started his craft as an independent solo artist in the '90s. Fifteen years ago, he formed a band, The Sixers. And it was then he found greater mainstream success and also pressure. Label execs and industry personnel were telling him to be more country or less folk or more rock. Oh wait, less rock. At one time he's asked to be more like Jakob Dylan and the Wallflowers. Years later, like Adam Levine and Maroon 5, of all things.

No matter the specific advice, there was a continual choir, telling him to be less like himself. The resistance, telling him to hide his authentic self, for the sake of the marketplace. These days, Stephen is back to being a solo artist. His most recent release, *Objects In the Mirror*, is an alt-country masterclass. It should be no surprise that some of his most striking work is being written and recorded at a time where he is most in tune with his authentic self. It's also taken 2 decades to get here. Then again, anyone who's on that same journey won't be surprised. Time is a necessary part of the equation.

On this episode, Stephen Kellogg opens up about his relationship with the resistance, and how it kept him from being his true self for so long.

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Matt: All right, welcome to The Resistance. Still here in season one. I'm here now with Stephen Kellogg. Stephen, how are you doing today?

Stephen: I'm doing very well. I'm slightly frantic, but I'm essentially very good, Matt. Thank you.

Matt: [laughs] Appreciate you carving out some of that frantic space for us to make this happen today. Just to get us going, for at least this first season of The Resistance, I just want to read a couple sentences from the book that informed the theme of this podcast, by Steven Pressfield, called *The War of Art*. Pressfield writes this, and Stephen I'd love for you just to kind of say where you're at with this quote, if you will.

Stephen: Sure.

Matt: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the un-lived life within us. And between the two stands resistance." Just kind of curious for you now, as a veteran artist, or even as a family man, what resistance looks like, what form it's taking for you, your relationship with it.

Stephen: Sure. Yeah. Well there's plenty to unpack there. That's a great quote, because there are all the things that you dream and aspire to, and then there's sort of the reality of carrying them out. And it makes me think of this ad or Instagram or something that I saw recently that said, "It's not enough to just have a good idea. You need to make a good idea happen."

And I feel that way in both art, and as you mentioned, family, too. I know that I want to be a great dad and a great husband and the best ever, but what's involved with actually being that? How do you actually develop the discipline and the skill sets to carry that out? And so of course you face that in both art, but it's interesting to think that you actually face that in your life, in your family life, too. Just trying to be that person that you're striving to be.

I guess if I was to think about, kind of answer that question for myself, I think it's having enough hours in the day to do everything you feel there is that needs to be done. It's maintaining a sense of priorities, is a resistance element. On the one hand, I'm leaving for tour in two days, so when your kids say, "Dad, can you do this? Can you play? Can you help?" You think, well that should be my priority. But I also need to leave for that tour one way or another in two days, and I'm either going to be prepared or I'm not. And if I'm not prepared, does that really benefit them for me to go out on the road and not be ready to do the job that they need me to do well to pay the bills? So it's not as easy as it sometimes seems to make that call.

The third thing I think really would pop up as a resistance element is patience. I can read a million books about how I'm supposed to respond as a band leader or dad or husband, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm going to respond that way. When you're working on, you may not have gotten a lot of sleep, or just have anxiety, or have eaten something that's made you feel bad, and you respond completely out of character, and that's just the reality of life. So those are three things that come to mind right off the bat.

Matt: Sure. That's interesting that when we were sitting down to do this and you were talking about the frantic schedule, even earlier when we were kind of getting acquainted here, that time, don't you think that part of that is learning, like you said there's not enough hours in the day. And I think for me, I have to learn how to divide the things I think need to get done versus the things that really do. How do you do that as a family man? You have four children, is that correct?

Stephen: Yeah, four daughters.

Matt: Okay, so you have four daughters. What are their age ranges?

Stephen: So we have a thirteen-year-old, an eleven-year-old, an eight-year-old, and a six-year-old.

Matt: Okay.

Stephen: Yeah, we've got all stages of young-ness happening.

Matt: How difficult is that, like the scenario that you set up earlier. You want to get in all of this fathering time, probably husband time, and also get ready for the road in two days.

Stephen: Yeah, I mean, it's difficult. I think it's difficult for all of us. All of us parents. And all of us people. If it's not kids, it's something else. We all have our various stuff. But I mean I think it's harder than it actually seems. Because you think well of course the priority should be, again, should be the family. And that's how you do this right. And what's important.

You mentioned knowing what's important. So considering for a second it's important for me to write this book that I'm writing, because I have deadlines, and I've promised people this book will come out. But I end up doing a lot of little odds and ends, because mentally I'm just not able to sit down and write unless I have a pretty clean slate of odds and ends.

So someone could argue, well you're having trouble prioritizing your situation, and you need to put that little stuff aside, but I just have been living with me for almost 42 years now, and I know myself well enough to know that I hear what you're saying, but really I need to get these two hours of odds and ends done, and then I'm going to write so much cleaner, and it's going to be easier for me. So in that case, I kinda gotta do the little things first. I don't always like that, but that's just the reality.

Matt: Stephen, I'm so glad you brought up the book. The book is, from what I can gather, titled the same name as the album that's coming this month, correct?

Stephen: Yeah, so the album's coming out here November 23rd, and the book will be out March of next year, and they're both called *Objects In the Mirror*, although the subtitle of the book is "A Storyteller's Take on What Matters Most." And it's a collection of essays about the things that I think are the most important things, elements to a life well lived.

Matt: What's the impetus for you to write a book in the first place?

Stephen: [laughs] That's funny you ask me that, Matt. I just turned in a revised version of the introduction last night, and it speaks to the question why I wrote this book. So it's fresh in my head. Part of me, full disclosure, part of me wrote a book just because I just wanted to see if I could do it. I just was like, man, I have friends who I really respect who have written books, and I thought, I want to give this a crack.

And then the other side that I'm a little more proud of than that is that I'm trying to articulate the best things that I've learned so far in my life. I want to pass those on to my friends, and to my kids, and to the people that listen to my music and who have honored me by sort of believing in what I do. And I think that songs are a wonderful way to do that, but I'm sometimes aware of the fact that not everybody likes the same kind of music. And I feel a little limited on occasion by the fact that people can't get sort of the wisdom, for lack of a better word, because maybe they don't listen to the same kind of music that I create. I thought a book could be an alternative medium that could allow more people to benefit from the best thoughts that I have, if that makes sense.

Matt: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. You brought up a couple paths I'd love to go down here, but the first one being the idea that someone doesn't listen to maybe Americana or whatever you want to term the genre that someone wants to place you inside. That a book is different. Do you find that that is also freeing for you? Because a song is a four-minute vehicle, let's say. So you're trying to distill down this wisdom into three to four catchy minutes that have some sort of formula to it, if you will, or some sort of,

there's going to be a bridge, I need to say it in this many stanzas. A book allows for, I'm assuming, a lot more freedom there. Or has that been problematic to not use the same vehicle you've learned how to use album after album, and suddenly try to express something without those boundaries?

Stephen: Great question. I think it's been wonderful to have a new vehicle that can stretch out more. But having said that, it has been so much harder than I thought it was going to be. It is like trying to edit a two-and-a-half-hour song. Just keeping track of it is the trick. Some fellow authors who I have been able to lean on in this process have confirmed, yeah, this is a lot to wrap one's head around. Writing a book is no joke. And I can't make it go as fast as I can make a song go. I'm so familiar with that format that I can kind of see where I'm hung up most of the time and know who to bring in. But a book, boy a book, if you don't have the right support, you can really just crash on it.

So this has been the hardest piece of art that I've ever had to get there. And I'm not there yet. I mean, I wrote the first draft. I'm now revising it. But I have some miles to walk yet. I've gotten far enough to know it's going to happen, and it's going to be good. But that's like making a record, where you're halfway through and you're like, okay, this is going to be good, but I'm not about to relax. There's some effort that's still required here.

And I am actually having these morose dreams about, like, what happens if I die and this doesn't get finished, and I just spent the better part of my year working on this unfinished thing? And that scares me. It's morbid, but it does go through my head.

Matt: You've been making music for a long time, and your longevity in the business is certainly a rarity, where I'm sure you've seen several of your peers move on to other things. So I don't know how much you can still sort of feel in touch with the way you felt when you first started making music. Do the two feel similar? The way you feel right now, the insecurities or the fears or the confusion around the book, and trying to put that all together. Does that feel similar to the way that you remember feeling when you were first sort of finding your footing as a musician?

Stephen: That's a really astute question. I think that the answer to that is, not really. I think it feels pretty different. When I was starting with music, it's like you know you're creating music because you're sort of called to. The lines come into your head. And you're doing it, and then you see it get some attention from it, and that's kind of fun. And so you just kind of do it, and you're being swept along.

This is much more intentional. So I'm making sort of the book in a way that is much closer to the way I make music now. There's a maturity to it, even though I'm out of my depth on this, because I haven't done it a lot, but I can sort of see the way forward. I can see how one could get good at this process if one did it more often. In a way that when I was beginning as a songwriter, I'm not sure that I knew the way forward. I'm not sure that I knew that you had to find a way forward. It was so cosmic, and you didn't know what you were supposed to think about it.

This, I'm much clearer. Like, okay, this is a process. And every time I learn something, I sort of file it away. So it's pretty different. Although, yeah, I am similarly out of my depth, but it feels a lot different than I think it felt when I was getting going with songwriting. And in some ways, I wish, it's a cliché, but you just wish you could have known, as a younger artist, the degree to which everything is a process.

The sooner that you start learning, like okay, this is a process to be learned, then the more you can get out of the whole thing, and it can not be so scary and daunting. Knowing, hey I'm going to need to learn how to write a catchy chorus. Those are things that, when I started with music, I didn't know I was going to need to do that. I was just sort of throwing darts in the dark. And then eventually, you learn that, oh, I do

need to know that. But I wish I had known that, because I think it would have made songwriting more fun sooner.

Matt: Yeah. That's pretty interesting. We talked a few years ago, and I was looking back over that transcript to kind of get a feel, and my favorite quote was, you said, "I am always surprised by how much there is yet to learn. If I'm honest, I'm a little disappointed that some of this stuff has taken me this long to really absorb."

Stephen: Yeah.

Matt: And it sounds like kind of just the same thing even a few years later.

Stephen: Aww, man. When did we have that conversation?

Matt: That would have been right around the *South, West, North, East* project.

Stephen: Okay. Cool, yeah. Even since then, boy, you just keep picking things up and it vibrates you. Your frequency just keeps kind of intensifying or raising or whatever it is. But you ask really thoughtful questions, and you provoke really interesting thoughts, so I'm not surprised we're stumbling on that same feeling again. But yeah, I stand by those words, for sure.

Matt: Well let me flip the tables there. Because if you want to write a book that's filled with some wisdom, you have to also feel the opposite way, right? So we're talking about the side of you that feels like, gosh there's so much to learn. Wish I'd absorbed it. And yet on the other side, it takes a certain level of confidence to put out something in that way.

And the way I wanted to go down that road was, I'm listening to the new album, and it feels like, I just made this quick note, especially after listening to the track "High Highs, Low Lows." And I just wrote, "This sounds like a song that someone could only write after really experiencing a lot in the industry." It's a veteran song. And I just wondered if that was the kind of music you feel like – do you agree with that statement, or are you too close to it? Like that's only the kind of thing I would say, and you can't say that as an artist.

Stephen: No, that sounds right to me. I don't think you kind of come on the scene and write that one. I think it just sort of – and there are other songs on the record, too, that I think you just have to kind of live them. You have to be where I'm at in this moment in life to sort of be able to have that come out of you and make sense.

And I guess just, if I realized something in the last couple years about my place in music, it was just that I'm really good at being me. And I don't know that I'm really good at doing much else. I know that might sound a little trite, but a lot of what I was trying to do on the labels over the years was, they were trying to harness the part of me that's magnetic and marketable and appealing. And so they're looking at what works in the marketplace and saying, "Stephen, can you connect this side of your personality to this thing that works?" And I would try to do that, and I would do an okay job of that, but hit songs don't really come from anything that's okay. They come from something that's really great and super special.

You know, I'm a pleaser, and I wanted to connect to that. I very much want a lot of people to be able to absorb what I do. I want that. I want to reach a lot of people and try to do as much good as I can while I'm here on this planet. But I think that I found myself chasing things and not really doing the best. And so when you find yourself without a label, like I have for the last two records, you go, what's the silver

lining here? Okay, I'm not with a label anymore, and there are some things that aren't good about that, but what could be great about that?

And one of the things that could be great about that is, well let me be myself, unapologetically myself, across the board, in every capacity. Let me say exactly what I want to say. Let the music, let's not worry about if it's too country or if it's too this or too rock or too folk or whatever. Let's just be the best, most authentic version of ourselves we can be. And that is what I think this album is, and writing the book from the same place.

I have a publisher for the book now, but I didn't when I started writing it. And it's a free concept. So what do I want to say? What's important for me to say? Not what's selling. Because what's selling is cookbooks. But my version of a cookbook isn't necessarily going to be any good. And what I'm doing may or may not be super marketable. But I know if it means as much as it means to me, that there are enough people on this planet that it's also going to mean a lot to. So my goal is to reach them, to hopefully be able to make that monetarily bring something back to me that allows me to continue doing the work that I'm doing now. That's a long answer, but I think that is the answer to what you were sort of alluding to there.

Matt: That sounds like a pretty recent discovery, then, looking at your catalogue. Do you remember a defined moment that you sort of woke up to that? Like when you realized, gosh I'm chasing, or I'm people-pleasing, versus being myself. Or is that sort of the slow realization of, well, I'm independent now, and so here we are?

Stephen: Yeah, it was a little bit of both, because when you're on the labels, you're just grappling with wanting to do the right thing because they're saying – I've never been on labels where I didn't like the people I was working with. I'm not saying I've liked every person I've ever worked with, but on the whole, being on labels was always a good thing for me. Even when it didn't work out.

So they would say, we like you. We believe in you. That's why we want to do this. And I would be internally grappling with, well, I don't sing the way, you know, Adam Levine sings in Maroon 5. So why are we referencing them with me? That doesn't make sense to me. How am I going to do that? I feel like I'm a disappointment if you are – how good a Maroon 5 is Stephen Kellogg? Not very. And that's the kind of a losing-sum game to play. But that's essentially the game we were playing with whoever it happened to be at the time, whether it was the Wallflowers, that was a big one. Could we be that, could we be this? And there are artists that can do that.

There are artists who are very malleable, and they change. Even artists like U2 are always evolving to kind of, this is going on in music now, and now we're going to do our version of that. And they do it authentically. But that's not really my superpower. My superpower is being very Stephen Kellogg. And I would grapple with things like people saying you can't use so many specific dates and names. And then I would turn on the radio, and there's the Plain White T's having the biggest, the number one song in the country with "Hey There Delilah." And I'm like, well, they did it. Can't I just be, you know. But I always thought that was a failure on my part. The part that was sort of a new realization, was realizing, I didn't fail, I just wasn't being as authentically me as I possibly could have been, because I was searching so much and trying to do that. And it felt like I was failing because we weren't having massive commercial success with these things, really.

And it was only when I started, I made *South, West, North, East*, and I thought, that's not quite it either, but I like being able to be free to try all these different hats on. And then this album that I just made, *Objects in the Mirror*, was like, okay. This is the hat I think I like the most. This kind of alt-country, rock

guy. And so I'm going to put on this hat, and I'm going to sing about these things, and I'm going to see if I can do this.

And I'm not going to worry about, like, if I don't think it's a failure, then it's not a failure. And nothing anybody says about it makes it a failure. I'm not going to use the same metrics that we've been using of sales and the feedback of others. I'm just going to look at, did I say what I was trying to say, and how effectively did I say it?

And that also feels like maybe that comes from age. Maybe that's just something about 41 and just being comfortable enough in your own skin to say, my goal is to be the best version of myself that I can be. This isn't a competition. It can feel that way, but it's not. Art isn't a competition. Life isn't a competition. We all have our own road to walk. The way that we walk that, and what we see when we look in the mirror really is the only metric that matters.

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Stay tuned for a special talk-back session, and join us for our next episode, a conversation with Emmy-winning writer, Lynn Renee Maxcy.