

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.7

Dave Monks (Tokyo Police Club) interview – Episode Transcript

Dave: I would rather do it and put it out like that and start becoming the person who does that kind of thing than not do it at all.

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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.

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Matt: There are days where the places we find resistance are the moments we're suiting up for war. As we get ready to take on some personal or professional challenge, we'll find The Resistance rising to meet us, like some opposite and equal force, pushing against our efforts. Then there are other days, dark days, that require considerable effort to even lift our head off the pillow. On those days, we feel the resistance to even get up at all. And the air feels thick with the pressures that seem to encumber our every movement. On those days, it's common to feel frozen, and to turn passive, and to even become observers of life.

Dave Monks has been feeling more of the latter lately. Dave is best known as the frontman and bassist for Tokyo Police Club, an indie rock band out of Ontario. He also released his first solo EP just a few years ago.

Other members of Tokyo Police Club have gone on to release side projects of their own, as well. Yet somehow, Dave says he's still worried about taking musical steps away from the band. These songs have to get out, he says. And yet he's not sure if he has permission to even make them.

How many of us have often felt frozen in the same way? You want to make a move, you want to chase an idea, you want to improve yourself, but you're not sure if there's room for it. In those times, we allow the perceived needs of others to keep us from doing what we want? We feel the music that, quote, "needs to be let out," yet we're worried what happens if it actually does.

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We've all felt this force of resistance at work in our families, in our workplaces, and the other intimate spaces we inhabit. My hope is that today's conversation with Dave can provide some language for moving beyond those worries and some handles to grab hold of for the journey ahead.

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Matt: Hey, Dave. I want to start out our conversation the way we've actually started every conversation here in Season 1, and that's by reading a couple sentences from Steven Pressfield.

Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*, by the way, serves as our source material, in which he describes the resistance, the title subject. "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the un-lived life within us. Between the two stands resistance." Dave, we've started every episode this same way. Just wondering, as I read that quote, I would love to know your own response to it or your own relationship right now with resistance.

Dave: I just feel like I'm moving through it. Like I feel like I'm in sort of a year where I'm taking a lot of actions to find out, to get to the other side of that.

Matt: When you say "moving through it," is there a particular form it's taken for you?

Dave: I think one thing for me is, I mean, it feels like fear and confidence. But I think for me, one thing is like relationships around me. I feel like relationships around me can hold me back, because I'm really focused on keeping harmony with all the people in my life and like, I'm a total people-pleaser, and I don't like any conflict. I hate ruffling feathers.

So I tend to build this whole vision of myself, or limit my actions, to what won't cause a fuss. And then learning more that either certain actions or certain music or whatever isn't going to bother anyone, or that certain people, if they are bothered by it, actually don't really matter. It's not as dramatic, maybe, as it sounds, but it feels dramatic within me.

Matt: I feel like when you say that, I could think of maybe some personal applications. But I'm curious how that plays out in creative applications. Because you even mention music. What does that mean for the music that you make?

Dave: Recently, and at other times in my career, I've been recording in LA, and there's something about being in California that's so far from my, like it's just far from my family, it's far from friends, it's far from exes and romances, and sometimes I'm there on my own, without my band. I find myself traveling there because I get this freedom from all these relationships and like I wouldn't want to, I don't know. That make sense?

Matt: I mean, does that mean, in other words, in the music that you've made in the past, if you're craving that freedom, or you find LA feeling like it's giving you that sense of freedom, that makes me intuit the fact that maybe you've made music close to home in the past and felt restricted by the presence of people you know or like known structures of some kind.

Dave: Yeah, it's like I'm, I guess it's like certain things like I might say in a song that I don't know, I worry that someone, be it family or band or friend or something, I just, see even like I'm tensing up about it. I don't even, I'm like, ooh, I don't want to talk about these people on a podcast, because, and like they wouldn't even know. It's not even like there's any villains out there. But yeah, I think what it winds up in the fact is like I want to get away from people, but then I have to learn how to make some kind of healthy isolation, where it's not just running or not seeing anyone.

Yeah, and then you meet people, other artists and other people who are sort of struggling to be themselves, and you wind up figuring out which friends really are totally 100% accepting, and I

don't know. Man, this sounds so vague, sorry. But it is a thing, for me, that like I need to be okay with that kind of stuff.

Matt: Yeah. Do you feel like there are things that you, even now, want to say, or maybe even feel responsible to say, that you're hesitant to say? And when I say that, I don't mean on the podcast here. I mean musically.

Dave: Yeah. Well, I think there's always been something, like balanced and kind of maybe humble or like, I don't know. My band is so un-egotistical, and it's so balanced and I feel like for the listener, as well, the songs, like I never want to bore the listener. I feel like the music isn't really dinner party music. It's music that you can put on and it's trying to engage you the whole time. I mean, just like 90% of music.

But anyway, I feel like there's some flamboyant star kind of stuff I can't do in my band, and there's also, you know I think I'm a good guitar player as well, and I play bass in my band, so I always crave to shred Zeppelin-style, and I don't get to do that. So I actually started a new band in Toronto with some friends this summer, and I play guitar in it, and I just, yesterday I bought this silk red shirt that I'm going to wear on stage. It's just like baby steps, but it's crazy how rebellious buying that shirt or playing these shows feels. It's just, I don't know. I feel like I'm Dave. Everybody knows me. But it's like, I have other things to say. What I'm saying is yeah, in my music, I have other things to say.

Then I also go and put out a solo record, and I'm working on more solo stuff, and I really see that as part of my future, and that's part of the person who I want to be at the end of my metaphorical day. And somebody that I have trouble being in the moment. But there's more of like a personal and specific story that I want to tell, that's difficult with the band, because I always want the band to be able to relate to all the lyrics. But if I'm exploring some spiritual or, I don't know, odd sexual feeling in a song, I don't want to make everyone play that.

Matt: Okay, that sounds polite, which is always equated with positive. Of course think of others. Of course consider their own musical interests here, maybe ahead of your own, whatever. But you just mentioned earlier that the band is this ego-less band. How much of this is your own assumptions about conversations you haven't had with the band, and how much of this is conversations you've actually had, where they've said, dude, please don't explore that spiritual idea.

Dave: Right, like part of me is like, I have this guilt about going off and doing other things, but I think if it really came down to brass tacks, they would be like, yeah, go do that and get it out of the way, and create more room for us to do something else. And I think that's kind of what's happening now. It's weird. I'm actually just so in this moment.

I'm working on a solo record. I just started it, and I almost started accidentally. I'm just like, whoops, I'm working on a solo record. But I have all these songs, and I play everything on them, and that was one way of me feeling like, I'm not replacing the band. This isn't in contrast. This isn't in contrast to the band or conflict. It's more of a companion piece. It's like, you like the

band, now you get to see the inner guts of the singer. It's very minimal and intimate-feeling. But then I did a rocker on my own, and I felt so guilty about it. And I was like, oh –

Matt: Really?

Dave: Oh, damn it. I was like, oh, fuck. Greg would crush this beat. Here I am doing it, and I don't know. I just, I'm trying to just be like, you know what, if I act like I know my path so well, I'm only limiting myself. So maybe this is fine, and maybe the band is destined to go on and make some fucked up techno record next, and me getting these songs out of the way is a blessing. Because the song has got to come out. That's another thing for me. The song has to come out. I would be heartbroken if I didn't get to say what was in some of these songs. So it's almost like, yeah I could save it for the band, but I've got to make sure it comes out, so I've got to work on it. Oh, is that going to make my solo record really disjointed and weird-feeling? Yeah, probably. But I don't know. It's just got to come out.

So yeah. Look how weird my resistance is. I also try and keep everything organized in my mind. I'm also like, I like the feeling of knowing where I'm going, and then you've just got to keep remembering that you're totally lost.

And then another thing I come back to a lot, which is actually from *The Artist's Way*, as well, listeners, I secretly told Matt I was into that book. But another thing I come back to a lot is anything worth doing is worth doing badly.

Matt: Wait, can you define that?

Dave: Yeah. Here I am, I'm making this, I think I'm making a solo record. I think I have this other rock 'n roll band, and it's like, maybe this isn't that well planned out, or I don't really know what I want out of this. And maybe I'm kind of just stumbling through the dark on this, and maybe I fucked up the drums on that one song, but honestly, I would rather do it and put it out like that, and start becoming the person who does that kind of thing, than not do it at all.

Matt: Dave, I find this pretty fascinating, because there is clearly this confidence and commitment in you to see through the creative process. But you're also very cautious. Even in our conversation, you've couched so much, like when you were describing the freedom of buying that red silk shirt –

Dave: Yeah, that drives me nuts sometimes.

Matt: You even give the disclaimer, "I know it's not a big deal, but..." as if you have to explain that to us, so that we don't think anything more than what you want us to think about it. That's quite a combination, to have that level of confidence in the work or pursuing something that could be bad and putting it out there. Like that's a brave thing.

Dave: Right.

Matt: And at the same time, it's still couched in this, you know what I'm saying.

Dave: Well, I don't want to be an asshole. I feel like every year there's another fucking horror story about somebody who's, you're just like, man I want to be a happy, functioning artist. Like I don't, and I want to be able to live. I don't want to have to go live in the desert or something.

Matt: Do you think your own response to this is largely due to the industry? Seeing the machine and going, I see what this could do to people. There's the typical rock 'n roll front man. There's movies made about it, or caricatures of it. I'm never going to be that guy.

Dave: Well, honestly, I'm fine. One thing I'm fine with is working. Like I don't mind the touring. I don't mind that stuff. The thing that I hate is how untrue people are willing to be in order to create something that they think might be more successful commercially. People are willing to bend relationships and sort of speak with their own interests at heart about your music on the pretense that they know what's right, as if there's a right. As if there's a way this song or this thing can become something more, and that that more is important because of X, Y, or Z. It just fucks with the music.

And I feel like we started so young that I had no way to filter out what was good input and what was sort of said with good intentions but was ultimately damaging my ability to pursue what seemed interesting to me. It's taken me a long time to figure out, oh that's the stuff that I need to set aside. And yes, people are always going to say this or that, and it really, you know even though it might feel confusing or hurtful, it doesn't affect my path.

Matt: Dave, take me back to the first solo release. How nervous was that of a release for you?

Dave: Like, zero. It was the most, not nervous at all. I had just, I think we had put out *Forcefield*. Yeah, we'd done *Forcefield*. And *Forcefield* was a really difficult album to, through the process of, just the feeling of being in our band during *Forcefield* was pretty difficult.

Matt: Can you put something tangible on that? What does that mean?

Dave: We looked to others to steer the ship, and they gave us expectations, and then they bailed on it. It was like someone was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go over here." And then the day the record comes out, somebody quits and it gets shelved, like an A&R guy quit or whatever. The whole thing, it was like DOA at the label. And also, I think, musically it has some of our best stuff, and musically it has some of our most misguided stuff. So yeah, it was just really difficult to see that.

So then I moved to New York, and I think I partially moved to New York because I just felt like I needed to be someone who would live in New York, and might be that kind of person. I don't know. But I went to New York, and I was in love, and I just, I'm always writing on acoustic, and I just, or I would write, and I just was like, yeah, I'm just going to do this fucking love album. And it was so happy, and it was so freeing, and I think it was one of those times where I felt like I had very few relationships that were impinging on me. Because sort of the band needed some distance, and I was in a new place, and I just went for it.

Yeah, it was cool. It was total exploration. And I feel like I started working out my way of arranging things and saying things when I didn't have Graham, Josh, and Greg around.

Matt: Were you nervous to tell the guys at first? Like hey, I need some time to do this.

Dave: I was nervous. But then I started to realize that like they didn't want to play on those songs anyways. And they all liked it, and they came to shows, and they were so supportive. They are amazing people. It just felt healthy. It felt like something I needed to do.

Matt: I would think that would be good for the band, but I read a recent interview from you, where you were talking about how the band had kind of started – the quote you said it began to feel like a creative dead end.

Dave: Yeah I think that's – we had done *Forcefield*. Then I did the solo thing, which was all creative juice, but I was still really blocked. I did that, and then the next couple of years were just like, New York started to change for me, my relationship started to change. I was working on doing my commercial work and stuff, just trying to get a buck, and the band did those EPs, *Melon Collie*, and there was a real sense of like we didn't know what the future was, and there was very little trust. I don't think we all really trusted each other, and I think it became a really disjointed thing. I know that Graham definitely said he doesn't even feel like he's on some of that stuff.

Matt: Wow.

Dave: Yeah, it was just kind of like, you know I think our manager came up with the title. It was like the ultimate, like, I feel like we kind of fell asleep at the wheel. But I really like some of the stuff on those records. And actually, I just don't think it represents the band doing what the band does best, necessarily. We did, there was like co-writes on it and stuff. Yeah. That was a hard time. And sort of that despair is what I think TPC was born out of. That was the low point.

Matt: Take me to those moments. Because I think we can learn from these things. I am at least curious. You've described a couple points where, uh, that's not really us, or it didn't feel like the band. Or there was good, but there was some bad. When you're in the middle of those creative seasons, you pointed to cowrites as one of the things that was negative about it in some way.

Dave: The whole thing was like looking to other people to validate. And like, okay, if I do this, maybe that will work. I don't like the title of those records. And it came up at this, I think it was like our manager came up with it, and the idea was like, we need something zappy. You guys have been around for so long. Let's get people talking. And let's do something weird. And I was kind of like, I don't like this, but I also don't feel like it's healthy to pull like a veto card on this, like a grumpy lead singer thing. And everyone seemed kind of into it, but sort of almost like in a tuned out, self-sabotaging kind of way. And letting that title happen was kind of like, I don't know.

Yeah, the smashed watermelon, like I think I was pissed. And yeah, I think in the songs, it was really difficult for me to say anything. Because I had, I think I was starting to become unhappy in my relationship and in New York, but I didn't know how to deal with that. For my reality, that

was going to be a big deal. I didn't even know I was dealing with that kind of feeling, I guess. And it was really hard to say anything meaningful in the songs. And I think that's when you get the most blocked is when you're not facing what's true around you.

Matt: Giving away control, like that over the creative, if you're feeling resistance, you're just scrambling for any answer to the resistance, but you're describing it as, we were making every bad decision, really.

Dave: I think the resistance there, I mean some of that stuff is almost like a product of the resistance. But we just wanted to be, we still had this dream of like yeah, we've gotta make it somehow and we've gotta be bigger or something. And we have to, it was all coming from a place of like, the system is broken. We need to scramble to fix it. So it wasn't coming from a place of self-confidence.

Matt: Do you feel like you're on the other side of that?

Dave: Oh yeah, definitely. I feel like, I mean it's a long road, and I see the path, but I'm definitely, I've taken the turn. I'm like, oh, I got off the exit I needed to get off at, and now I'm on this other road.

So yeah, we did those in 2016 and then in 2017, things really started to change and started to feel better.

Matt: What was the turning point? Can you identify a conversation with the band, a moment with the band?

Dave: Well, I had a family event, kind of, that I think sort of woke me up to fragility in life. And then, the band told me they weren't going to want to make another Tokyo record, at the end of 2016. And yeah. And I think just like, all this stuff, I just kind of was, and when they told me that, I was like, oh, man, no. I can't deal with that. And then I started to, and that's when I really got into, that's when I started doing the Artist's Way thing, and I got really into morning pages and that kind of thing, and just was like, I'm going to write my way out of this.

Matt: For the sake of listeners, let's dive in there real fast. By the way, The Artist's Way is a book by Julia Cameron. It's been around for, probably since, is it from the 80s? Is that right?

Dave: Yeah.

Matt: Like, early 80s. And it's kind of a motivational/even a workbook, to kind of help artists work through, can you describe coming across that and the process for you?

Dave: Yeah, well the thing about The Artist's Way is like, it's a spiritual guide to creative recovery. And that's like a huge barf for a lot of people. And I think, so my mom gave it to me when I was in my early 20s, and I started reading it, and I was like, 'Hell no. I'm definitely not down for this.'

And I reapproached it again. Well actually you know what, I remember, so anyways yeah. It's a 12-week course. You do a thing every week. And it's amazing. It's just like a step by step face your demons and get the shit done. And I highly recommend it to anybody who's just got anything, like I don't even think it has to be that artistic. I think it's just good. And then yeah, there's some god stuff in there that you can take and rephrase and reframe however you want. But I think part of it also is it requires that you're super open to whatever might come up during it. But anyways, yeah, you do the thing, and you journal every morning, too. And that was super helpful.

And I think, so yeah, I had this sort of band crisis. I had just some relationships around the band in terms of the industry stuff had started to sour, or not sour but just kind of phase out. And I was just wondering what I was going to do next. And I just, I think the book was just like a prompt, or sort of like a rope or a tether to help me start, I don't know, just digging in there and figuring out what I had to say that I wasn't saying.

And I started writing a lot of songs. I wrote a huge amount of songs, and I stopped demoing songs. I just would do voice memos. And all of TPC, I just sent the band voice memos. And that way, I was able to work through so much material, and we tried out so many songs. And I didn't, I did a little bit of cowriting, I guess, with just like friends, but I pretty much stopped cowriting. I just stopped looking other places for answers. And I think I'll be putting out songs from 2017 for years to come, because I wrote so many.

Matt: Take me to, you said the band tells you, we're not making another Tokyo Police Club album.

Dave: Well they were right. It wasn't fun. They were like, it's not fun, we're not part of it anymore. Or not we're not part of it, it doesn't feel like we're part of it. They were like, we just did the 10-year anniversary tour of *A Lesson in Crime*, and it seems good, man. Like the story's complete.

And I kind of got that, but I also just knew I was miserable, and like I couldn't handle the band being over. Because I didn't, it just didn't feel like a win. It just felt like a fuckin letdown in the end. So I just told them let's not be in this band. Let's been in a band that we would want to be. What would that look like?

Matt: Were they open to that at first?

Dave: Yeah. I was like, we don't have to be in this band we're all drinking Kool-Aid about. You know, yeah, we're going to make it! It wasn't about devotion to the band. It didn't require any devotion. It just required commitment to certain timeframes and certain goals. It was like a couple weeks of rehearsal, or a couple weeks of writing, I mean, six weeks in the studio, I think I just said that, I just said okay, well quit the band, whatever. But just give me eight weeks, and we'll start working on this record. So if you can give me that, let's just see what happens after that.

And then I think through that process, we were able to sort of change the goal from wanting to live into and validate these high school dreams that we had of being some kind of heroes, to just the goal changed from being successful to just finishing, to just making the music that we wanted, that we felt like we could make. And so the goal got accomplished the day the record came out, not the day that we, you know, headlined whatever venue you feel like validates you. I don't know.

Matt: So maybe moving through that resistance really came back to let's just let the work be the work no matter how the work is turning out.

Dave: Well, we wanted it to, I mean, we wanted to follow the work in such a way that it turned out something true. Like it wasn't just spaghetti on the wall. Like the work was being followed, but it wasn't about how it was received. That's a pretty concrete, real-world way of being like, we are the ones who will judge this a success, not the people around us and stuff.

Matt: It makes me curious how things feel on the other side of that lesson learned. Like right now, for you and the band.

Dave: On the other side of it, we just recorded a new single, and we are super engaged and self-managing, and we're also making more money because we're self-managing, which is something to be embraced and not like weirdly shied away from, which we all used to do. So yeah, things feel good and more clear, but at the same time, I know that in the next few months, we're going to have to be like, okay. So now what is it? What's our next internal goal? Because if we just sit around for too long, it's going to turn into like, oh I just, I think there should be more strings on the thing. And oh, we didn't sell enough tickets at the blah blah blah. So you've got to keep coming back to it. But there's way more honesty and it's way better.

Matt: So even when you learn such lessons, it's not about arriving at a lesson but continuing to fight to –

Dave: Totally.

Matt: Stay centered on that lesson.

Dave: Yeah. Like even here I am, in these other things I'm doing as well, I'm just like, man, I've just got to do it for the process of doing it and not worry so much about – it's like that person at the end of the day thing, like I was talking about. It's like yeah, you want to move towards that person, but still it's the moving towards that's important. Not actually, like okay, geez, when am I going to be that person?

Matt: Dave, we'd love to hear, you mentioned the new single. You mentioned maybe even this new band, new solo material. What exactly does 2019 look for you and those around you?

Dave: I think I need a manager. If anyone's listening. No, I need like a friend who's really organized. Because I don't even know what a manager does. Who the fuck needs a manager? So 2019 is getting really busy. But it is great, because it's the year, I think it's actually I'm on an off

cycle. I think my year goes from like June to June. Anyways, yeah. 2019 is like, I'm going to put out solo music, I'm going to do something with this other band, and I mean we might just like play Wednesdays at a local bar forever, but that would be amazing. Tokyo, we haven't really checked in yet. So I don't really know what's next for Tokyo. I mean, everyone feels creative. And we feel like there's still a lot of gas in TPC.

Yeah, I just want to keep acting. I feel like in the last year, I really figured out a lot of stuff I wanted to do and enjoyed being and that kind of thing. And I just want to keep bringing that stuff to life, because it goes, it takes small steps. It's all baby steps. That's the other thing. Man. Anyone listening, it's all baby steps. It's like micro steps. It's like buying some paper. And it's tuning your guitar. And it's opening your book. It's all super micro steps.

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Matt: Stay tuned next week for a special bonus episode.