

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 17

Alex Ebert interview – Episode Transcript

Alex: Why is the static life so revered and the evolving life so distrusted and cast aside?

[intro]

Matt: So the other day, I heard a quote. And I think it's appropriate to just lead right out with it. Bill Reynolds, a music producer and a member of the group Band of Horses, has a mantra in his studio that he just says, "Let's ruin our careers today." Jay, what do you think of that quote?

Jay: I think it's an awesome quote. I mean, I know what he's trying to say. I guess in the greater context of everything, just going beyond what you're doing at all costs is....

Matt: Yeah, so I was interviewing a young band, and they were entering the studio with Bill, and they had all these questions about what next, and how do we follow up, and Bill's mantra just kind of challenged them. Like, screw it! Basically, who cares what you've done in the past. Go with what you feel you want to do. Not only do I love that quote, I wrote it down the moment they said it, because I just thought, oh that's such a powerful mantra. But I thought it was a great way to open today's episode, because as you know, today's guest is Alex Ebert, who has basically made a career saying, "Let's ruin my career today, by doing whatever I want."

For those of you who don't know Alex's music, he began with the punkish leanings of Ima Robot. Most of you likely know him from right after that. He formed a band called Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros, which, there's no such person as Edward Sharpe. He's just this sort of hippie trope as he describes him.

Jay: Do you know how long it took me to actually figure out there was no Edward Sharpe. It's like, there's no Hootie, there's no Edward Sharpe. What is happening?

Matt: There's no Hootie or Edward! Yeah. We're allowed to fake things, right. Yeah, he makes up Edward Sharpe. They make it big with the hit "Home" and that album. And suddenly we deal with a decade of Mumfords and Lumineers and all kinds of....

Jay: And Hey Ho's.

Matt: Hey! Hey! Ho! Hey!

Jay: Yeah. I think the thing that was just jumping into that, there's so many good quotes. You guys listen, you'll know that we open with, we call it a "cold open" in the biz, [laughs] with a quote, a cold quote, and there are so many good ones in here. This guy has just been through so much, pushed through so many things. And one of the things that I think as artists we can all kind of relate too, artists and even just in general, is the expectations of so many different people, and at some point, you're fighting. If you're fighting against them, you kind of lose yourself. Because everyone has their own opinion of what you should be doing. And you have to be true to who you are, and you're the only one that looks at yourself in the mirror in the morning, is kind of what it boils down to. And so you can be pushed or pulled, or you can just walk at your own pace, to your own beat. That's kind of what Alex talked about through this whole interview.

Matt: If you're not up the moment on Alex's music, he just released an album this year in which he's way into hip hop, which is part of his background anyway. It's just the latest music shift from a guy who's not afraid to make them.

So on today's episode, we hope you enjoy it. It's talking to someone who's just learned how to ignore the industry that was really unfair to him from the very beginning. It's really a doozy. It's one of my favorite conversations we've had in our short history of The Resistance so far. So we hope you enjoy it. Stay tuned for our conversation with Alex Ebert.

Matt: Just to catch us up, before we begin, do you have an encapsulated way to talk about the creative plate that you're spinning right now?

Alex: Trying to sort of forest fire a slow burn. It's been, this is like one of those three-year, four-year, some straggling pieces of it are over a decade old, this album I've been working on. And that's one area of music. And then there's a tech company that have been developing, and not just in my mind or on paper, but actual code being written and things being built for the last 5 years, and then a book that I've been writing for the last 8 years.

So it's like these multiple mountains, sort of slow grade mountains that do have peaks, I believe, but there's...I don't know if you've ever been hiking on steep terrain, but there's this thing called false peaks, where you keep thinking you're seeing the peak, but it's just the latest and the most vertical thing you're going to have to climb until you realize that once you summit that, there's another many summits. And then finally, you get to that one that really is the fucking end, and it's a pretty good feeling, but at that point, you have to sort of re-mountain the mountain. Then you have to put it out and hope that you're still invigorated by the thing. And in some ways, I like that long, slow process, because with each step you take up that mountain, you really have to remember whether or not you actually want to summit that particular mountain, if you even care about that mountain. And I think that that's re-confirming in a cool way.

Matt: By the way, do you work best that way, when there are varied creative outlets –

Alex: Multiple –

Matt: Yeah.

Alex: I do, yeah. I can mono-focus, but I work, work is my favorite thing to do other than playing with my kid. Having some rush of in-love adrenaline. Those are the three things. Work, the rush of love, and hanging with my kid. And work takes up most of that. So most of my friendships are based around the creative process. I open up about my personal life with my creative, whoever I'm being creative with at the time. So given that so much time is devoted to work in general, it's really nice to have those palate cleansers that are also work and creative. The word creative, or being creative, could be supplanted for the word "work." If someone out there is like, "wow, this guy is really a serious guy," it's not serious at all. [laughs]

Matt: Well, Alex, I'd love to dive into the premise here by actually leading out the way we lead out most of our episodes, which is from the book, "The War of Art" by Steven Pressfield. And Pressfield opens his book with a couple lines that I'd love to read, and then what I'd love for you to do is just basically say your relationship to that, whether that's true for you or not. Whether you believe that or not. Or what you're wrestling with.

"Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the un-lived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Like, what's true in that for you?

Alex: I think for me what that would privately boil down to is saying more directly and unshrouded in the sort of cloistered language of poetics and lyrics and things that fucking rhyme, is to just really nakedly

say what my thoughts are on any particular matter. To, in a sense, writing, nonfiction sort of writing, just direct words and opinions, is something that as a musician – well, let me de-nude what I'm saying now, because I'm already cloistering it. I'm a fairly sort of political, socio-political sort of observer, thinker, private writer – privateer.

And I have some projects that speak to the matter like something called proxy vote, which I didn't mention because it started to sound like I was bragging about all of the things I haven't finished. But yep, so this thing called proxy vote. It's another one of the tech sort of platforms. But it allows anybody to vote on any bill in Congress, sort of in real time, and then I had a SuperPac from 2018. We supported candidates who pledged to use the app that aggregates the will of their own constituency to inform how they would behave in Congress. So in other words, direct democracy kind of thing. And there's things like that that really put it in the lap of others, but I'm certainly not saying I'd want to be a politician, but rather as a musician, you're so encouraged not to say precisely what you think, especially when it comes to politics. And you're encouraged by that, not just by people and your managers and the business itself, but you're encouraged by that, because the language itself doesn't sing that well. You've got The Clash, you've got Rage Against the Machine, you got these examples where specific things, especially with The Clash, or U2 does it where very specific things. But I was thinking about it, it's like what creates greater impact? A song about, well, I love U2, and I'm mildly friends with some of them. But let's just say a song like Sarajevo, and then what has a bigger impact? A song like that or all the money that they've raised for something like Sarajevo, through their pop songs, which are making more money for them? Through their sort of whatever, iconography. Where does the biggest impact lie, and all of that.

So anyway, you're persuaded, through the politics of popularity, to sort of speak to the largest swath of people. And even as an artist that's perceived as more of an outsider artist, not a pop musician, I still sort of succumb to that, and in a certain way, it's not just that. There's been a culture of, sort of progenated by punk-rock ethos of being really hyper wary of being earnest. And if you're not going to be earnest, then songs of sort of love and communi – communiality, I was going to say. Coined my own phrase. And communalism or whatever, sort of these hippie tropes, would be really uncool. So a large resistance that I had to overcome in my own life was moving from punk-rock ethos to a sort of hyper-uncool, let's all get together and, sort of hippie ethos. And yeah, dabbling with all of that was difficult. There's all these tropes that were sort of, up until, really until 2008, were really sort of off the table in terms of what could be considered hip.

So that was a large jump. I will say my most dangerous song that I feel like I've ever written was not like some of my Ima Robot stuff or anti-imperialist stuff or anything, but was rather the song I did with Edward Sharpe called "I Don't Wanna Pray," which starts off with just this really earnest, childish phrase. By childish, I mean like kindergarten. "I love my god, god made love. I love my god, god made hate." And going through all these different things. I've always loved the idea of re-appropriating language, especially language that's become really divisive and been tried to be owned by one particular group. So like the word "god," for instance, re-appropriating that. I'm not religious. I don't follow or really believe in any sort of organized religion. But I do like the word "god," and it means something to me. And to be able to sort of reclaim spiritualism in the pop public sphere felt really fucking dangerous to me. I was like, "Oh my god. When's the last time I heard some shit like this?" This is really Christian pop from the 1960s. Like no one would think that this was some cool shit. But so that was a really fun moment where I met the resistance and pushed through and was like, well, let's see what happens. So that kind of speaking the mind and going out on limbs I think is always going to be the most invigorating resistance I have. Because I don't know, it's dissent: dissent to the group to which you belong. And dissenting is always scary, because we have that social anxiety baked into our brains, where we really want to retain our status

or improve it. And the way you do that, usually, is by pleasing people, not by infuriating them or making them think you're lame.

Matt: You know, I'm glad that you just said that. You brought up a couple of avenues I would love to chase. But this idea, what you just admitted, this social anxiety that, quote, all of us deal with, is interesting to hear from you, because it seems like you've always sort of had maybe thicker skin or more of the sort of like, the proverbial water off a duck's back, than most artists. I just read a recent quote from you that said, "I've always loved just making whatever art came to me and felt sorry for the paradigm of artistry that constrains the artist to one look, one sound, etc. Charting your career from the outside feels like that. It feels like a Sufjanesque, this guy's going to do whatever the hell he feels like doing, and could care less about the marketplace. And that's what makes it compelling. At least to those of us who feel that way.

Alex: Oh, I'm hyperaware of that, yeah. All those changes are difficult. They're not as water off a duck's back. And they're difficult only in that, every one of those moments, iconoclastic moments where you're suddenly going against the grain, or you're stepping out and there's some doubt into your head as to... The whole premise of fucking commerce is a brand. A brand that people recognize, identify with, and you create brand loyalty. This podcast has its name. It's got its topic. It's on brand. Edward Sharpe has its name, its topic. Everything ends up on brand by hook or crook.

You almost can't avoid it if you're going to put anything out and that thing be successful. You feel a natural compulsion via the genuine pressure of an audience to repeat your successes. And as soon as you decide to do something that would not be a repetition of your successes, suddenly there's fucking pressure. I mean, when I put out Ima Robot, my first band, and the review was, "Welcome to the newest, most annoying voice in rock 'n roll," was the Rolling Stone leadoff fucking line.

Matt: You're kidding.

Alex: [laughs] No. And then we put out Edward Sharpe, which is sort of the antithesis of Ima Robot, and the focus of again Rolling Stone, but every fucking article was "you can obviously not trust this person, Edward Sharpe, who is attempting to sort of don the guise of a guru. He is a fraud." So Edward Sharpe now is a fraud, because he was in Ima Robot. How could you be punk rock like that and hyper irreverent, and then flip over to this earnest hippie thing? This is bullshit. Fail. That's the vibe I had from the gatekeepers of cool, going into the Edward Sharpe thing. Like a total sense of betrayal that they felt, in a sense, of you cannot trust this guy. This is fake. Fake news.

Meanwhile, people that are obviously doing things that are, I wouldn't call it fake, but certainly completely irreverent, ironic, unearnest, and donned as total guises, like whatever. From Lady Gaga to fucking any band you can think of who's ever been styled by a stylist. Which we never were. Also, we were never produced by a producer. We were never even mixed by a mixer. We did everything, it was all DIY, and we're the ones faking it. So it was a really interesting juxtaposition, but that's what happens, that's what can happen when you change. Like my new album that I've just been working on, I'm fucking rapping. I'm rapping a lot. [laughs]

Matt: That's actually truer to your background than people may realize, right?

Alex: Yes. Yeah. Hip hop was my entire life. The only thing I could relate to was rap and hip hop, and so I had my first rap group when I was like, fucking eight. It was a gangsta rap group called Kabang. And on from there, until the late 90s when I started to fall out of love with it. Really the 2000s when it became like hyperfocused on sort of, it became glam rock. Yeah, I started to fall out with it around then.

But then you know, I don't know, I'd be in an Uber, and I was listening to pop radio, and I was like, you know what, this shit is starting to get melodic and sound like, I've gotta put out these, actually these really really early, like 2000 era demos from Ima Robot, because this shit is, there's a renaissance happening. It's kind of fun to watch.

Matt: Earlier, the Rolling Stone couplet that you mentioned, from one response to the next. Do you think that is actually a good thing in your history? That immediately you weren't that drawn in, but instead you were sort of pushed to this sort of, I don't know, an outsider, rebellious....

Alex: Yeah, look I ended up writing like, the nonfiction book that I've been writing is actually called Kingdom Cool, and it's basically entirely about the sort of self-relegation mechanism of social anxiety that is called "cool." And yeah, I love that all that happened. I actually kind of really relish being outsider and what it's done is by not feeling safe on the inside, it's made me require myself to feel safe on the outside. And I don't know that I would have made an album, for instance, where I'm rapping in one half of the album. If I felt all cozy and snug on the inside and hadn't been able to develop, I guess as you say, that thick skin or that appreciation for the outside.

Matt: In that moment, how much were you just wanting, like I feel like if I'd read that, I'd want to like, okay I'm packing my ball and bat and going home. I'm curling up in the fetal position and questioning what the hell did I even do. How much of that was at work in that moment, or how quickly were you able to sort of move past or through?

Alex: I mean, it pissed me off, bad. Especially the bit about, it created a greater depression in me about humanity. Why is the static life so revered, and the evolving life so distrusted and cast aside? Why is it that we haven't gotten used to the idea, or into the idea of artistic evolution in the same way that painters get to enjoy for periods? Even painters.

And even producing a body of work, I just basically ended up getting to realize how boiled down to commerce and branding this all is. I remember reading a quote from Rihanna the other day. It was like last year, couple years ago. Someone's like, "Do you think you'd ever play a show with Taylor Swift?" And she said, "No, I don't think so. Our brands don't match." I was like, wow. She didn't say bands. Because she meant brands. And that's pretty amazing. And it's pretty far that we've sort of strayed from the idea of even being aware of that and not selling out. But now it's really just like nakedly about branding. And I think that there's something fundamentally fucked up about that when it comes to how that....

Imitating past successes, which is the definition of building brand loyalty, negates true innovation. New innovation will come, but it won't come from you. It will come from someone else sort of breaking your pattern. But why not break your pattern yourself? It would make for a life much more fully lived in the artistic sense, to me. To be able to feel like you have the liberty and freedom to fucking meander and wander and explore. It's an interesting conundrum. And I think it makes up a lot of resistance for a lot of people. And I think a lot of people experience this particular resistance.

Matt: When you're creating sort of these brand new ventures, so to speak. When you're looking at the industry, and it's longing to categorize you, build a brand, etc. When you're looking at that and saying, "No. I'm following my own muse. I'm going wherever the energy wants me to go," how much of that is out of some spirit of rebellion, almost sort of like a "I'll show you," and how much of that is out of more of a nonreactive centeredness that is going with the energy and is not even concerned with showing anyone anything?

Alex: I think the person I'm proving most to is myself, because the sensation of stepping out, dissenting the group to which you belong, doing something that's not a repetition of success, there's always the specter of failure. And what does failure mean? It can mean many things. Financial ruin. It can mean total embarrassment. IT could mean excommunication. It could mean just personal pain or shame or whatever the hell it is for a particular venture. And I love that fucking specter. Because what that means is suddenly I need courage. And for me, courage is a paint-by-numbers thing. It's like, do I think this could not work? Yes, definitely. Am I ready to fail? Yes, sure. Do I think I'm going to fail? Not at all. I think that I'm going to do this and to take that leap with faith and know that to trust yourself is a very specific feeling. That, essentially, is the definition of courage, is to trust your instinct. And when you trust your instinct, you act on it. And that's going to be courageous in certain circumstances. And that's a pretty cool feeling. Even if having failed to trust yourself.

So the feeling, I guess the overriding thing I'm trying to prove to myself, is that I'm willing to trust myself. And that's a really invigorating fucking feeling. I should say, though, that spite or anger or competition are also really valuable. I started writing a whole book that's 400 pages deep because of a really, really hyperbolically shitty article about me in Spin Magazine. And I fucking love that. I love doing that. People have asked me point blank, well of course you've never made anything to compete with someone else. I'm like, are you crazy? Of course. Sgt Pepper's was made in response to Pet Sounds. And how many amazing feats have been accomplished because of sheer competition? I mean, sports, yes. And then so many other things. And you know there's a fine line and distinction between competition and inspiration. You can also just be inspired but want to feel like you can do it better. So yeah, there's all that sort of wrapped up into it. I hate hearing criticism, but it almost always galvanizes.

Matt: Was that true for you as a kid? Have you always been wired that way?

Alex: Yeah, when I was a kid, my dad... When I was 13, my father wanted to send me off to a trade school in Colorado, because he said I just wasn't an intellectual. I'm thirteen. And he was like, "Nah, you're just not, it's not for you." Because he was a straight A student, and he just hated sort of what a cut-up I was. I really didn't like school, but what was fun for me, looking back, is I had really solid fundamental reasons for not liking school. They were actually intellectually sound adjudications of like the uselessness of school.

What I love now is these articles coming out about how less school creates smarter people, and now the 30 hour work week in Japan and elsewhere improve productivity by over 40 percent. And the best students in the world now are all in Scandinavia where they reduce the school day to like 4 hours. I love all these things coming out. It's like finding out that people with higher IQ tend to be messier and curse a lot. And I'm just like, "Yes!" But I have this whole lifelong fucking obsession with proving my father wrong about being intellectual. So it's kind of an interesting thing. So because he said that, I had that.

When I listen to the very first thing I ever recorded singing, because I'd been rapping all my life, but when I started singing, when I was like 19, I got the demo back, put it in the car, went for a drive, I started sobbing. It was so bad. I just thought I was the worst singer ever. And I think I'm harsher on myself than probably anyone's ever been on me. But I just thought I was the worst singer. And I always look to that moment as a piece of resistance that somehow, I don't even remember how I pushed through it. I had to have had divine help somehow, because it was just the most crushing afternoon of my life, and then I kept going for some reason.

Matt: Let me ask you the flipside of this. Because we've been sort of deriding this industry and all of its silly conflating consistency with integrity, etc. But you have had moments when you've been, I mean I

don't want to say the darling of the industry, but certainly you have found success, big success, within this same industry. Does that create a weird relationship in a way, within yourself?

Alex: For whatever reason, the success of Edward Sharpe was, so like with Ima Robot, we made, Roman Coppola directed a video that ended up costing over \$600,000 for our first video with Ima Robot. We signed a nearly \$1 million deal. We were one of the last big deals of the whole big deal era. And then the album sold 30,000 copies and was not a success, as termed. And so then with Edward Sharpe, I started a label, because Heath Ledger was actually going to put out our album. So I started with his own label. I started one after he died. And then we did a joint deal with another small label, and we put it out, and Home wasn't really on the radio. And we were darlings of SXSW.

There was definitely an element of the sort of structure of the industry that we have been darlings within. But it was like public radio. It was like sort of the mom and pop of the industry. And I always really loved that. Yeah, I don't know. So my sense of the industrialized aspect of like how operationalized we were at radio and whatnot, I never really got to experience too much of that with Edward Sharpe, because we just didn't really write songs. Like when Home came out, nothing else sounded like it. So it wasn't, it was a different terrain, you know? So pop radio just wouldn't play it. Mostly it was a cultural hit. And I liked that.

I guess it lends a certain relationship to me with the internet and with weddings, by the way. Because Home gets played at weddings. And I used to just be so, I used to have massive problems with the institution of marriage, and yadda yadda, very sort of like stuck-up kid stuff, like from my early 20s and it sort of just took hold and set in and never left. And then seeing how many people share stories with me about their weddings and the song Home, and during the song Home, I'll hand the microphone to the audience, and they'll tell stories and four out of five times it's a wedding story. They got married to this song. And it's made me have this total turnaround to an entire sort of way of living and institution. It's changed my perspective on things, just by proximity.

So there's things that success changes about you in a positive way, I think. I still enter a theatre that we're going to play and look around at the ornate whatever, and think, Jesus, this is amazing. I'm just so fucking humbled that I'm in this fucking theatre, and that people are going to come see us play. I'm still really sort of just blown away by the whole thing. So hopefully that sticks, because I quite like being in a state of wonder about the whole thing.

[music]

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