

## THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 26

### Brooke Waggoner interview – Episode Transcript

**Matt:** Thanks so much for joining us. As we lean into this conversation, we'd love to start where we start with all of our artists, and that is with our source material from Steven Pressfield's *The War Of Art*. So Brooke, I just want to ask. I'll read this. It says, "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the unlive life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." I know for you, you have family life these days as well as creative life. I just wonder for you, what does resistance look like for you a few albums into your career, or what form does it take?

**Brooke:** Yeah. I think for me, it's taking on two forms right now: one of them being stamina. Being a mother of multiple children is just a wonderful challenge in and of itself, but keeping some reserves to try to make things and work on art is not always easy. That being said, it also helps provide me with a lot of messaging and material that I do want to address and talk about. So it's definitely got pros and cons. But I think a really big piece to the resistance aspect for me right now is also just feeling like everything is just very loud.

The world feels – we're just so interconnected, which can be wonderful. But I think just being older and farther along in my career, you become more aware of just how much is out there. So the last few years, I've definitely struggled with, am I just adding to noise? Is it more beneficial to be quiet? And I think a lot of that has to do with just my interior life. And the days are very full and loud, and finding that quiet time and that space to kind of reboot is definitely a challenge in and of itself.

For the medium that I'm in, which is songs, it just feels like a really tricky space sometimes to take part in now. It just doesn't feel like it's about songs anymore. It feels more about this big, full, holistic brand of image and platforms and what's your social justice cause, and what's your social media presence, and who do you know, and it's all these other elements now. I think in a lot of ways, it's been a little sad. It's robbed a lot of the joy of it for me.

But I also am aware that that is the battle, and I try not to listen to that all the time, either. Because I think the value is still there. I think it's just finding the time to justify addressing it. And it feels sort of dormant right now. I actually am working and writing quite a lot privately. I work with a lot of other artists in town. I teach now. I teach college students songwriting, and I really enjoy that. And my own personal work is taking on some new forms and shapes. I do a lot of poetry, a lot of things that don't involve sound but that feel musical, and still writing songs for me.

But I do have some things up my sleeve, when the timing is right, that I'm really excited to put into the world. I've made a pretty conscious decision that I'm not going to do it the way it feels like it's supposed to be done now. Because if I have to write songs for playlists on Spotify, I'm just not going to do that. I think there are some artists that are so good at that. And I'm very aware of my detriment. And that doesn't feel like a very healthy space for me, so I've had to sit a long, hard time and think about how I want to put things out. And I think for me, at this point, it has to all be free. I can't obsess about the monetization anymore. That was becoming too, it just makes it commercial. I am a musician, and I have to make money to live off of my music, but it feels

more like a leap of faith now, and less calculated. So that's been very freeing, just in the creative process. Not worrying so much about, how many streams could we gauge that this would get? How many eyeballs? What's the visibility? I feel like I'm getting back to the very beginning of what I loved about songwriting. So that's a very long answer to your question, but those are the two things. I think it's just the noise out there and my own personal stamina of what I'm capable of in a day.

**Matt:** Let's kick down both of these doors: the stamina and the intersection of art and commerce. I'm interested in the stamina angle, because certainly you have every reason to not make music. We were talking earlier. You didn't say here, during the recorded interview, but you're pregnant with your third child. It would be very easy for you to not make music and to have no one give you any trouble for not making music, because obviously you have other endeavors that are more important. And anybody with a kid or two, or soon to be three, would completely understand.

Do you feel that those compete? Is that frustrating, if there is some competition there? What does that mean for the artist in you that wants to create, and yet for the mother who is enjoying and loving her family?

**Brooke:** Exactly. That's a good question. I think I let a lot of that go a few years ago. When I had my first child, I put out my last record. This was 2015. And I was on the road a good bit during the first year of his life, really leaning on family and friends to help fill in the gaps. And then about a year and a half into his life, I just felt pretty strongly about pulling back on my visible career as a musician. I didn't really want him growing up so much in my world. It felt really important to make space for him fully. I just didn't want him growing up on the road with me doing music. That felt like a very strong thing for me. And I have friends who do that, and do that beautifully, and I think they're being equipped for that. I just didn't feel like that would be the right move for our family. So I pulled back and took some time to figure out what that would look like and how to address it. And I just found a lot of peace in doing that. I also know how I work when I'm making an album or touring. It's just so all-in that it's really difficult to make space for other people, to be honest. It can be very consuming. And so it felt like a good time to kind of shift gears.

And I felt a little bit like I was outgrowing the medium, too. This was also happening around the time that, it was the first album where we still had physical product printed out, CDs and also vinyl, but the change, the shift in the physical product side of things was really, really happening then, and now, it's very clear how that works now. There's still a handful of artists who make CDs, and that's great, but that's just really changed. All those things were happening in tandem, and I just had to keep reassessing what my original goal was when I got started 12 years ago. And the things happening in front of me with the sphere of the industry of music were really shifting, and I think I needed to just kind of take a minute and go, okay if this had been how things had looked 12 years ago, would I have gotten into music in this way? So I think just taking a really hard look at it. What is it that I'm actually wanting to do and make? What's the goal here? Is it just to acquire more and more people, and followers and fans? Or do I just need to take some time and figure out what to make next? And that's what I've done.

So I haven't put anything out in almost 5 years. And I think it's been really healthy and really good just to have that time. But the tension is, it's not a lot of tension. It just feels very right. I feel very at peace about what I'm doing, even though a lot of people may not see it, or it's not as visible. I was actually reading a review recently, a publication did a follow-up piece on an album I put out years ago called *Originator*. And there were all these different comments and commentators about the project, and kind of asking what I've been up to, and a few of them were quick to say, "I don't think she makes music anymore. I think she's like a mom now. Which is really sad, but if she's gotta do that, she's gotta do that."

And I mean it's fair. We don't have that intimate relationship. But I'm highly aware that's the perception. And yet that feels like the right thing to do, so that's okay. But it has been a big shift. And I think I found peace in knowing it's not going away, it's just hibernating for a little bit, and replenishing right now. And so that's given tremendous peace. There's not a lot of tension there. I think the hardest part with stamina is just wanting to keep that muscle moving. I'm definitely a better parent, I'm a better wife, I'm a better friend when I do have some time to make something. It's a pretty physical release for me to be able to kind of get that out.

But I also need a reason to do it that feels sort of communal and not just, "I need to write a song today" but something that feels like "I need to write a song for this group setting or this event or this performance." I definitely am motivated by that. I think when those things come along, just trying to seize those moments and make time for that. So yeah. I don't know if that's answering your question. I think I'm talking around it a little bit.

**Matt:** Brooke, and you can tell me if I'm totally wrong on this, but as an outsider, looking at your career, it seems like your instinct to sort of make this change, like you said, came at the time that you were becoming the most visible within the industry. You play with Jack White at the Grammys, join the band there in those collaborations, and then it seems like not too long after that, suddenly you're making those familial changes. From the outside, it seems like, oh wow, you're making these connections, and the platform is growing. Is that true?

**Brooke:** You know, yes and no. In some regard, I put out two albums post- the Jack White touring. The first one I put out on the heels of that, had a lot of visibility. I definitely struggled a little bit with the genuine nature of the interest. It kind of felt like now there was some weird attachment to a much more visible entity that is Jack White. But at the same time, also trying to just kind of, well, that's kind of how some of this stuff works. It's fine. Just keep going, rolling with it, make what you make. And then with my last album, *Sveven*, I think that one for me felt like things weren't necessarily growing. They had hit sort of a plateau, which is totally fine. I'm actually not all about global domination in that way. I'm very niche-oriented, like great, if you find a group of people that can support you, and it can feel connective in that way, I think that's much more enjoyable in the long haul. And I think it's probably healthier for your personhood. But I think I was having to compartmentalize a little too much with work life and road life and my son. And I didn't want to fully integrate them all. There was a real need to kind of stop one of them, and not try to just integrate it all in that way.

And I think the music business is really hard. I think it's about music initially, and then it's not. And that's the sadness of it. That's the sad part of the business part of it. It becomes about the

next thing, the next thing, the next thing. And once you start kind of entering a realm of name notoriety, of like who you know and people you're around, that gets weird. Yeah, those were interesting years, touring with somebody that's so well-known and respected was a great privilege, but also, you really get to see the interior of what it looks like, kind of at the top. And it's not that great. It's no better than whatever feels like your mundane life. It's still life with problems. It's just louder.

I think it was really good to see a lot of that, in a good way. It can be disillusioning, probably in the right way, just to kind of show, make sure you're doing things for the right reasons, and not just kind of chasing something or getting caught up in the noise. So yeah, all that to say, it's interesting to hear your perspective on it. And I've kind of left things at that. I have never done like a formal, here's a blog post, here's a mass email telling everyone I'm done, I'm moving on. Not solidifying anything, just allowing it to just kind of stop for a little bit. If there's any speculation, great. I'm glad someone's interested enough to speculate. Otherwise, music's always going to be there. There's always going to be a way to make it.

But the medium, I think I just need a different, I'll be honest. I am a little bit bored with the medium. I'm a little bored with how much music there is. How it gets made now is not very exciting. It's very gridded and stale. It's all computers. Most producers want to do so much stuff in post. They're constantly grabbing things that you've already recorded and dropping them in. I think seeing that is a real buzzkill to me. So I think needing to just kind of take a minute, reassess. Where are we, culturally, with music? What's its purpose? How disposable should it be? Those are big questions.

**Matt:** Do you think that creates a countercultural lane for you to exist in, then?

**Brooke:** Yeah, when I get really bogged down in that, there's always this wonderful moment of a random friend or a collaborator or a colleague, or somebody who will say something in my life that is a great, sweet reminder of, there's so many people that really deeply care about the quality of things, and about certain music they love and they invest and support. I'm highly aware so much of this is coming from being in my mid-thirties. You just start seeing the world a little bit differently. And I love working with the students I work with. They're all early 20s. They're so not jaded. They're so excited and hungry and ready to take on the world. And that's where I can really see what a young man's game it is. You kind of need that invincibility factor to go attack it. And I think for me, mid-30s, I'm highly aware of my mortality and my stamina now. It is dispersed differently now. So having to be really careful with that. I've seen too many sad stories come out of music, living in Nashville for so long. There's just too many broken families and sad stories around this art form, that no art is worth that. You've got to make a pretty clear stance at some point and just say enough. I can't let it take over in this way.

So all those things culminated for me. And it's evolving. It's growing and changing. Every year, it just takes on a new shape for me. And the dream looks different. I think for awhile, I didn't know what to dream next. I wasn't sure what the goal was. So I think that's when it's a good time to take a step back.

**Matt:** Let me push back in just one more way here. How can you tell a difference between a legitimate, “I’m bored with it, I just don’t even want to be a part of it, it’s not worth it,” or “You know what, I just don’t have the stamina for it, and that’s a healthy boundary.” How do you tell the difference between that and an excuse that couches itself under what sounds healthy? I don’t know if that makes sense.

**Brooke:** It does. Yes. So I’ve learned so much over the last decade that everything is a phase. So I’m not always going to feel this way, and I’m not always going to feel this stretched. I never want to take the seat of, “Well, it’s all crazy now. I’m just not going to be a part of it at all.” Because I feel like that’s when you get really, you’re the one missing out, actually. You’ve kind of decided that it’s all crazy and negative, and you don’t want to be a part of it, which isn’t valid. So I think just kind of knowing your own limitations of where you are in life, and being aware that it’s also a phase. Like this is not permanent. This is not making some stance forever that I’m done writing songs.

But I do feel pretty strongly about the way it gets out there. For me, a big strong point is the visible social aspect of music now. I really hate the count thing that goes on with streams. How many people have listened, how many people subscribe, how many people like it, who’s commenting. I feel pretty strongly that that’s kind of taken something really magical away from what’s being made. You’re kind of losing that singular experience in some ways. And now there’s all these opinions floating around that are just so visible and potentially toxic. Toxic even if they’re positive. You know, that can inflate the ego or create this spiraling roller coaster of emotions.

But I kind of miss the days when you listened to music, and you had no idea how many other people had listened to it. Somehow that changes how you hear things. So that, to me, does feel like an area where I just, I don’t know how I feel about that. And I don’t know how I feel about being told I have to do it that way. I think I’ve gotten a little weary of that.

There’s a really specific moment here. At the time, my distributor, when I put my last album out, it was like a week after the album came out, and he was like, “Hey, can you get me like ten to twenty electronic songs we could pitch to these Spotify playlists to try to give attention to your new album?” And I was just like, “Nope. I get what you’re doing, and I get why you have to do that. And nope. That’s just not what I’m going to do.” So that’s weird. It’s such a rat race in that regard. But being around other musicians can be so great. You really get back to what you all love and what you’re really trying to do. It’s just so many steps to get to the actual music part. That’s the reality of how it is now.

**Matt:** Brooke, earlier you said, “I think from here on out, my relationship with the commercial side has to be free.” Yet that sounds untested, because you’ve also talked about, “This has been a period where I’ve been attending to family and have pulled myself out of some of these things.” How much have you tested that to know that that’s true? And then what does that look like from here on out?

**Brooke:** That’s a good question. The plan is, I have kind of a new internal...system sounds like a fancy word. But a kind of hub of how I want to do music. Through emails and sort of these like

private offerings that aren't as socially visible. I'm not saying I'm done with social media. But I'm not putting music through those platforms. That's not the plan, at least. Building a music player that is exactly how I want it to be, where it's just not all about the count. And just making music for that, direct to subscribers and people who have stuck around on a mailing list or have expressed interest.

It is untested for me. I've never put music out this way. But it wouldn't just be music. I love to paint. I love to write short stories and poetry. I think a home for all those things, which so many people are doing now, is really exciting to see in action. But I want it to be done in a way that's just through an email. It's not living on a website or a blog, but it's in your inbox. If you subscribe to that, great, if you don't, catch the next one. And in a weird way, that feels good with the disposable factor of content now. And I can't call it content, because that feels too Business 101. It really feels like an offering. I need it to be an offering, or it's just going to be too hard to make it.

When I made the decision about a year ago that I think this has to be free. I'm not even going to ask for like a Patreon thing where there's this tiered followers, subscribers and patrons. Because then I can really make whatever I want. Then it's really, truly, it's not just free for the consumer, but it's free for me. And so there's no business model. There's no, "Here's how we're going to earn money." But it doesn't feel like it's about that anymore. And thankfully, I feel like, I've done this long enough that being able to build up a catalog, and the publishing world is amazing in so many regards for that, where you can really start seeing the back end of all the work over the years. There's just different ways to earn money. Because I'm not just starting out, I don't feel as reliant on stream counts and things like that. That was the first time I was excited to make something again, when I realized I don't have to worry about how many people are paying attention to this in that regard. I just need to know it's communal. And then I can make it.

**Matt:** When you make those kinds of decisions, what do you start to make? Did you start to write poetry? Did you start to write some compositions of some kind?

**Brooke:** Yeah. Both, actually. I had been writing poetry for awhile, anyway, and had been toying with the idea of maybe having a small run of books made, or what would I do with it. I have a handful of friends in the publishing world for that. But it's also kind of a debatable, dead language, dead art form. But yeah. I just started writing a ton more once I kind of made that decision. And then the songs started really pouring out from that. And it coincided with the timing of my family and I. We moved, we just got out of the city. We moved to, literally it's a little patch of woods. Really inspiring space, actually. That's just helped a ton, to kind of reconnect. I'm always trying to get a specific feeling when I make things. And it's totally how I felt as a kid. I'm trying to kind of re-harness that feeling. Not steeping anything in nostalgia, but really kind of going back to that place where, as a kid, you have no future and no past. You're just so in the moment. You just really focus on what's happening in the moment.

So the space we live in now has really helped provide that. It's really quiet, it's beautiful, it's really inspiring from a natural-world standpoint. Which really speaks to how I make music. I really lean on natural instruments. I don't do a lot in the digital realm of plug-ins and all the cool things you can do now. I still really lean on instruments that don't even have to be amplified.

And so that, for me personally, it just really speaks to me and allows me to write in the way that I feel equipped to write. So yeah, it helped a ton. It just really got the gears moving and the wheels turning.

**Matt:** That's wonderful. By the way, then once you're inspired, how do you carve out that space and time when you do have two little ones and another on the way?

**Brooke:** Yeah. You just...it is amazing what you can do in a day. You just find it. It's during a nap, or get up before they do, or you stay up late. When I'm at the university I teach at, I'll grab an extra 30 minutes in a practice room after I'm done teaching. Or you know, you just make time for it because you want to. Now I want to do it again. The desire is back, and so if that means all these things need to be free, then that's worth it. To salvage that feeling has just been more valuable to me than any kind of monetary gain. Truly.

**Matt:** I love that quote. Well, Brooke, for people who are interested then, in where these next turns, especially the free turns, take you, how do we sign up for that business model or stay alert to what's happening?

**Brooke:** Yeah. Well, I am on social media. And I haven't really talked about it on there yet, but I plan to once things are kind of ready to roll. We have sort of a placeholder with a website that'll go live pretty soon, where you can just sign up for the mailing list. So you know, all of the usual places you would go find someone that you want to keep up with what's going on. But the difference is that all this new material is just not going to be on the digital outlets that you're used to.

**Matt:** But we can sign up for it there.

**Brooke:** Anybody can. Yeah.

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