The Resistance - Duncan Sheik interview transcript

Matt Conner: Duncan, I'd love to start here, where we start all of our interviews on The Resistance. And that's with our source material from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. Let me just read this opening quote. And I'd love to get your response to it. Pressfield writes this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the unlived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance."

Duncan, I would just love to know for you, what does resistance look like, whether personal or professional. How are you wrestling with that?

Duncan Sheik: That's an amazing quote. I've been thinking about it a little bit this morning. There's so many levels to it and layers to it and interpretations to it that I've been sort of grappling with in the back of my mind. You know, on the face of it, the unlived life, just from a purely practical and sort of from the standpoint of reality, the unlived life is really just the life that you have left to live.

So basically we're talking about from this moment on. If, in the context of the unlived life that you might have lived in the past, I think pretty much everybody has some regrets, big and small about the way they've handled certain things and gone about things. But of course, I try to live in a way where I have as few regrets as possible. I'm a practicing Buddhist and have been since I was nineteen. It's kind of a tenet of my particular stripe of Buddhism that I practice that you attempt to live a life where you have no regrets at the end. But of course, that's really easy to say as a platitude and very difficult to pull off.

One of the things that sort of jumped to mind in terms of the unlived life and regrets, sort of on a less important and dramatic scale, is this idea of procrastination and the degree to which I sort of put stuff off in terms of my creative pursuits and time that I could have been sort of directly writing or recording or producing something or kind of being engaged, even in another medium, where I've sort of just spent time doing other things. And maybe beating myself up for that, to some extent. But, again, when I really think about it, I think everything that you do, and that you experience, becomes grist for the mill.

Maybe it's not such a bad thing that you're, that I haven't just constantly been sitting there like churning out stuff. You need lots of input in order to have decent output. And so, you know, I try to make sure that the things I'm inputting into my consciousness are books or maybe audiobooks, but real books as well, as opposed to just sitting around watching YouTube all day.

That being said, there's a lot of amazing stuff on YouTube. Even as somebody who makes music, there's all kinds of folks who post things about gear or that's really fascinating. As somebody who's involved in spiritual practice, there's a lot of stuff on there about that. So I hesitate to even categorize things as sort of junk media vs. nourishing media. But I do try and keep the balance towards the sort of more obviously nourishing things, to the extent that I can.

Matt: I want to go back, if you'll let us, to maybe some resistance in the rearview mirror. Or at least that's the question I have for you. You experienced pretty big success early on. And then, I guess I have questions there, and then I also have questions about, then jumping into the world of theatre and musicals. So I'd love to start with the former and just say, what did the success of the debut album, of "Barely Breathing," etc. Did that create a different kind of resistance or fear or pressure for you that you had to learn to stare down?

Duncan: Yes. Very much. I mean, I've talked about this a lot, but I'll try and distill it that makes sense in terms of this quote. You know, when I went off to make my first record for Atlantic, which that process began, really, in 1995, so exactly 25 years ago. Obviously, you have the highest hopes and highest aspirations. I was really thrilled and honored and excited about being on a label as storied and important as Atlantic Records. Certainly, at that time, there were still people there at the label that were just completely part of rock music history. People like Ahmet Ertegun. And that was amazing.

And the experience of making my first record in France with Rupert Hine, who produced the record, was by and large just extraordinary and really positive and beautiful. There were lots of things about that process that are really memories that I'll always cherish. In particular, recording the basic tracks, Rupert had bought this chateau north of Paris, and it was this really beautiful environment. It wasn't luxurious by any stretch, inside the building. It was all sort of Ikea furniture. But the building itself and the grounds were amazing. And you know we were in France, so the food was pretty good. So it was beautiful. And then recording the string arrangements at Metropolis Studios in London, toward the end of that process, and mixing it there, that was really powerful. Those were powerful moments for me, where I really felt like, oh. This lifelong process of my twenty-five years at that point, my lifelong process of trying to get to this place of making a good record, that dream is coming true. So that's all to the good.

And then when I came back to the states, and the record was finished, I sort of began the process of getting it out there and marketing it, and I started to tour with Jewel, and "Barely Breathing" went to radio. Shot a music video. Right away, things got much more complicated for me. And feelings about how I wanted to be represented, and how I wanted the record to be seen, and the company I wanted to keep, musically. In other words, bands and artists that were important to me and that I was influenced by, that I felt like I had artistic kinship with, versus the sort of bands and artists that I was maybe seen in the same light as, because they were also on Top 40 radio in 1996, at that time. That instantly became a very big source of discontent and concern and frustration.

The fact is that there weren't a lot of bands or artists who were on Top 40 radio in America at that time, who I felt any kinship with. My influences are probably fairly obvious, but in the 90s, I was listening to Jeff Buckley and Bjork and Radiohead. And then some of the other sort of esoteric stuff than that, and stuff from the previous decade, like the late Talk Talk albums, and people like David Sylvian, and the 4AD Records, like Cocteau Twins and Dead Can Dance and all that kind of stuff. Those were my influences and what I felt like were my antecedents. But I felt like I was painted into this corner with these very sort of corporate rock and pop bands and artists who, like I said, I didn't feel an aesthetic connection to at all, even though looking back on it, it was probably closer than I thought it was.

So that was sort of a constant struggle. And I'm sure that I wanted my cake and to eat it, too. I wanted the money and the overt success and the fame and the notoriety and the magazines and all that kind of stuff. I wanted all of that stuff. But I also wanted the sort of above-it-all cool factor of these other artists that I respected, and whose music I listened to a lot and even revered. So that was something that I had to learn to get over. I don't think I've ever really got over it. But I'm getting better at it.

Matt: Did the success of that album hang over your head on subsequent albums?

Duncan: Well, it did in a couple ways. One of them was just the sort of obvious fact that when your first record sells 700,000 copies, and you get a Grammy nomination, and you have a song that gets over a million spins at radio and sits on the charts for over a year, there's a set of expectations about what you're going to do next. Where you're maybe going to get close to that, if not beat it. Of course, my second record came out and to date, it's probably sold 90,000 copies, or maybe it's sold 100,000 copies. And that would be a pretty good number in today's universe, but in 1998, that was sort of a real disappointment.

So just from the standpoint of the people at the label, and just the culture at large, that was a moment when Pearl Jam and Backstreet Boys and Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears were selling millions, or 5 million records or 10 million records the first week the record would come out. It was a crazy time. So that was a very hard reality to swallow, when the success of the following things that I did was not as overt and frankly just didn't sell as many copies. They didn't get the same kind of attention. In a way, I actually sort of got what I was looking for, in that I think the people who did really get into Humming and

Phantom Moon, those were people who had more outside-the-box taste. But that came with its own price.

Matt: Yeah, I wondered if that would have been problematic for you then. Like if I could have talked to you then, to sort of feel like you were pressing up against those expectations, or whether it was freeing in that way.

Duncan: Yeah, I think that it was just like something that was the kind of background microwave radiation in my consciousness, that whatever I did, there was always some expectation in the back of my mind, whether I wanted it there or not, that I'm supposed to have another hit on the radio. And that was and is sort of a not very healthy or productive or good thought for me, personally, as an artist. I don't think that helps me do my best work.

I do think there are people out there for whom this idea of making hits is like a really great way for them to work, because that's what they do. That's what they love, and that's what they want to create. And they're good at it. Sometimes they hit the bullseye. For me, it's a little bit more like, I need to create stuff that is unique to my own artistic and aesthetic goals and my own sort of artistic point of view. I do better work when I'm not second-guessing what a big audience of the American populus or the world music listening populus. When I'm not trying to second-guess what they like or might want to listen to, I do much better work.

And that sort of, in a way, brings me back to a more spiritual way of looking at things. All we really have is our own subjectivity. That's the only reality that we know is totally true and real. So I had to kind of really, and I continue to have to do this, to force myself to make sure that my own true subjective sensibility is at work when I'm working on something or when I'm listening to something or in the process of creating my own stuff. I'm always asking myself the question, do I like this? Or am I doing this for some other imaginary audience that's out there? And the latter is not a productive way for me to work. But there's always this sort of little devil inside me who's like, "Oh, make sure you do this, because the kids will like it." Or whatever. And it's just nonsense.

Matt: Yeah. By the way, have you always been cognizant of that, or did that come into your career sometime?

Duncan: I think that I'm articulating it one way now that I wouldn't necessarily have articulated it in 1998, but I think the central idea and struggle has always been there.

Matt: Y**ou mentioned *Phantom Moon*, and yet you were also working on *Twelfth Night* around that same general era. Was that the transition to stage for you, or…?**

Duncan: I'll tell you specifically what happened. Basically, in 1999, after my second album cycle of Humming was winding down, I mean I had toured a lot to promote that record, trying to salvage what was mostly a sort of disappointing process with the release of it. At that moment, I mentioned before, Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears and there was sort of Backstreet Boys and N'Sync. There was a sort of movement in pop music that cropped up, post-grunge/alternative. There was like a mini moment of grunge and more acoustic alternative music that happened in the mid-90s, and that was subsumed by this Max Martin, ultra-pop music that happened in the end of the 90s and the aughts.

Talk about not feeling kinship, I really felt separate from that universe. The idea that you would actually dance in a music video was so bizarre to me. It was just so foreign to my consciousness that all I could do was sort of make fun of that stuff. Now Justin Timberlake is a billionaire and I'm not, but here we are.

So really what happened was I met this guy, Steven Sater, who I met him because he's also a practicing Buddhist here in New York City. He was and is a playwright. He had written a play that had a song lyric in

it. He asked me if I would write some music for that lyric, which it was a cool play, and it was a very simple lyric, and that was sort of an easy thing for me to do.

So I wrote and recorded this song for him. It's called "A Boat on the Sea." And Steven, being the very creative person that he is, he just started faxing me lyrics upon lyrics upon lyrics. Some of them that were connected to his plays, some of which I think were just lyrics he was writing. And they were fairly impressionistic and fairly poetic. Some of them were enigmatic. But all in a really interesting, beautiful way, I thought.

And so I just started writing music for these lyrics using an acoustic instrument palette. Eschewing anything electric or electronic, as a stiff-arm to what was going on in the rest of the pop music world. I had just gotten the Mark Hollis solo album. He was the lead singer of Talk Talk. He had made this record that was just all acoustic instrumentation. It's a really beautiful album. The last record he made before he went into retirement. I was very influenced by that, and listening to a lot of Nick Drake and things like that.

So I wanted to make this all-acoustic record that would have string and woodwind arrangements that Simon Hale ultimately did a really beautiful job with those. And I sort of got lucky in that Atlantic would never have put out that record, but Nonesuch was part of the Warner Music Group, and Bob Hurwitz heard what I was doing, and he agreed to put it out on Nonesuch. So that was a very classy place to put out a record like Phantom Moon. And of course the expectations are different there, in terms of sales and things like that.

In a way, it worked out really well for me, if you look at it in the big picture. But of course at the moment, you're still sort of thinking, where's my gold record? Where's my Grammy nomination? Where's all the stuff I had two years ago? It felt artistically satisfying and successful. And then there was a part of me that was missing all the trappings. So what I ended up doing was doubling down. Steven gave me a copy of the play, a translation of the German play, *Spring Awakening*. I think it was the Ted Hughes translation. He said, "Read this play. I think it would be really great if we adapted it as a musical." I did do the music for *Twelfth Night*. It was actually a year after that. But the first thing I said to Steven was, "oh man, I am the last person who should be writing a musical. It's not a medium that I'm super fond of, to be honest." Again, I had done musicals when I was a kid; in elementary school I was the Artful Dodger and Oliver. I was in Annie and Barnum and stuff like that. But it wasn't very cool, was it?

So anyway, with some cynicism, I read this play, and I really liked the play. I thought to myself, this play is great because it's so racy and it has such a punk rock attitude about it. It's a great anti-bourgeois sticking its finger up at the stodgy morality of Lutheran Germany of the late 19th century. So there was something really dark and beautiful about those relationships between those adolescents. And I thought, well, what if you did a piece of musical theatre where stylistically, the music hewed closer to what the cool kids are listening to on their iPods these days? This was 2000, 2001. So what if the music was alternative rock, as opposed to the style of music which I shall call "Musical Theatre Music," whatever that style is. And that was kind of a lightbulb that went off in my head. Steven responded well to that. Then we ran into Michael Mayer, who directed the show ultimately. Michael responded well to that idea, even though he came from a traditional musical theatre background.

So I began writing those songs in 2000, in earnest. Again, I think there was a set of things that I was influenced by at that time, which was kind of like folk music and then 20th century classical music. Things like Arvo Part and Steve Reich and John Adams. And then, alternative rock, for lack of a better word, but you know bands like The Doves, and of course Radiohead, things like that. And then, I had kind of gotten over, not gotten over, but this sort of stand that I had taken about electric and electronic instrumentation. I let that go, and I was actually listening to a fair amount of electronic music, as well. But again, pretty, I don't want to say avant-garde, but it was left-of-center electronic music.

There were these four genres of music that ended up in this stew that became the score of Spring Awakening. Electronic music, 20th century classical music, folk music, and alternative rock. And of course in the end, it was seen as a sort of alternative rock thing, because "Totally Fucked" and "Bitch of Living" are just sort of guitar-driven things. But that was the amalgam of musical styles that went into the show. It wasn't even on purpose that I was trying to be revolutionary, but it was kind of revolutionary. Of course there had been Tommy, and there had been *Rent*. There had been some things that had rock music aspects within them. But to me, a lot of those things were musical theatre music dressed up in rock clothing.

I was trying to do something that was authentically alternative rock. And I do think that sort of comes through in the show, and it's a big part of why it was successful. I think you see that with things, most obviously things like Hamilton where it's like, yeah. It did help move things along in the form to where it became open to other genres and more contemporary genres of music, stylistically.

Matt: Yeah, I think that's very clear there. When you have that success there, as well, does that open up the permission you feel to kind of chase anything?

Duncan: Well, yeah it did, for better or worse. I think, again, cutting to ten years later, or five to ten years later, working on *American Psycho*, and there trying to do a completely electronic music score, that was even more daring, in a way. And maybe it was a bridge too far. But yeah. I did feel like, oh. The key for me is to really try and just always be breaking new ground and to break rules and to do stuff that is sort of thumbing its nose up at tradition. And look. It's not that I disavow any of these approaches. I just, I understand that just thumbing your nose up at tradition for the sake of doing that is sort of useless. It needs to have a purpose behind it.