

## THE RESISTANCE

### EMILE MOSSERI TRANSCRIPT

**Matt:** Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and today I'm just so thrilled to have Emile Mosseri with us. How are you today, by the way?

**Emile:** I'm good, man. How are you doing?

**Matt:** I'm all right. How are you within the pandemic cloud that we're all under right now?

**Emile:** I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm actually, at the moment, I'm in Tel Aviv, visiting my dad and my family here. They live here, and they've all had both shots of the vaccine, so I'm kind of living, there's a new life. There's the future and the past all wrapped in one out here a little bit. People are still wearing masks, but things are open. And 70% of the country is vaccinated at this point. And that's growing each day. So yeah, I feel like you caught me in a weird time, because a couple of weeks ago, I was very much in the washing machine spin cycle, groundhog day loop, situation.

**Matt:** Yeah, 70% sounds great coming from the heartland of the states.

**Emile:** Yeah, it's maddening when you see how well they're doing here or in Korea. A friend was telling me, yesterday, it's exciting but it's also maddening, because you're like ah, I wish we were there. One day at a time.

**Matt:** Well, so excited to chat with you today. I told you before we started recording that I had just watched *Minari* for the first time last night and was just so really overwhelmed, overwhelmed by the overall viewing experience and found myself very emotion. Before we dive into the resistance itself, and where we typically start, yeah first of all congratulations on that, but I guess I wanted to ask you. The first time you saw the entirety of the work at once, how was that for you?

**Emile:** That's a great question. An experience that comes to mind is when I first watched an early cut of the film, which wasn't the finished product. We hadn't recorded the orchestra yet. But since I'd written the score from the script stage and written most of the melodies and themes and pieces of music that ended up in the film, I had written and recorded them before they started shooting, once they finished shooting I watched an early cut of the film that was more or less a version of what the film ended up being. And I watched it with Isaac, the director, and Harry Yoon, the editor, in Frogtown in LA, this studio that they were editing the film at.

I had a similar reaction to you where I was pretty bulldozed by it, emotionally. I was kind of a wreck. Sitting next to the man who made it and who was also so fearlessly diving into his own childhood memories and his own family and putting his parents and his grandmother up on the screen like that, it was was sort of a trip. It was trippy experience sitting next to him. Even though I'd already read the script, and I'd visited him on set, and I'd seen all the dailies, and I obviously knew what was going to happen in the film, the way that they had put it together, and seeing it all come together like that in that moment, I kind of was blindsided by it. I was like snorting and crying and trying to keep my shit together. But then I realized, maybe it's good to let it rip. Don't try to clean it up. He'll like that I'm crying. That's kind of the idea. I was kind of negotiating with myself the whole time. During the end of it, I had no say in it anymore. The end of that film is so powerful. By the end, I was like oh, wow. Whatever my plan was, it was kind of out the window for trying to keep it cool in front of my new friend, Isaac.

From there, working on it, seeing different screenings at Plan B, at their screening room, and then going to Sundance and seeing the final product, was overwhelming in another way, watching it with an audience. But the one that has the most poignant, most powerful memory for me is that first viewing.

**Matt:** Emile, I want to go back. We typically start every episode here. I'd like to read a quote to you from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*, which is our source material. I'd love to get your comment or how this strikes you. Pressfield writes this. He 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've spoken to you before with your band The Dig. Now here we are talking about an Oscar-nominated film that you've composed the music for. Certainly at different stages, I'm sure you've had different resistance, but what does that mean for you now?

**Emile:** First of all, what a heavy quote. I'm trying to think of it in the context of being an artist, and also in the context of just being a human being. The fact that we hold both of those things simultaneously within us all the time, the way we want to live our unlive version of our lives, I think of like your fantasies, and how you view yourself. What kind of person you want to be, what kind of artist you want to be, and then the gap between that and what you're doing is, I guess, that being the resistance. That's sort of a painful place to live, that gap between. I always think of that in the context of people that have great taste. If you have great taste, whatever that means, it's subjective. But if you know what greatness is, and then whatever you're doing, if it's falling short of that, and you can feel that gap between those two worlds, and living in that gap is sort of painful.

That sort of relates to what you call the resistance, or what he refers to as resistance. How to close that gap as much as you can. I think that's sort of a huge part of what being an artist is all about. Trying to chase that thing. And then at some point maybe realizing that it's a fiction. The minute you think you've actually closed that gap, then you're kind of dead in the water, because you're not going to get any better. But yeah, it's a tricky one. I always feel like, I've listened to music that I've made with other people in the room and been excited by it and horrified by it all at the same time. I think having somebody else in the room listening to something is a hugely useful tool because it reveals itself to me what I actually think about it.

**Matt:** When there's a third party there?

**Emile:** When there's a third party there, yeah. It's like if I play a song I wrote, and I play it for somebody, then I'm like, oh I'm excited for them to hear this part that's coming up, or I'm like, oh I really don't want them to hear what's about to happen in four seconds from now or whatever. I wouldn't have known if I were just in a vacuum. I don't know if this is connecting to the quote at all. It's just my first reaction. When you talk about the space between your unlive life and your actual life, and holding onto those two things at the same time, that's what comes to mind to me is how to be a version of yourself as an artist that you are the least horrified by. Or the least cringey about.

**Matt:** The least cringey. I like it.

**Emile:** I don't know if that makes any sense.

**Matt:** Yeah. You bring up a good point. I'm really fascinated by this, because you brought up the idea of a third person as a way to sort of honestly look at your own art, or at least get what you really feel about it. It feels like you're describing the reveal. I think a lot of people have the story that they haven't read to anyone. The painting that they haven't shown anyone. The music that they haven't played for anyone.

And yet, it's that reveal. But you're describing the reveal as like helping us to bridge that gap. To move between lived and unlived, but it also feels so painful, right? Like that vulnerability.

**Emile:** It is. And that's why I'm in such awe of someone like Isaac or Miranda, another filmmaker, or Joe, the filmmakers that I've worked with on these last few films that I've done in this space, in the film space, because all of their works are super vulnerable and deeply exposed. I think, in the process of writing anything, if you have a third party there watching it, then it is exactly that. It's that big reveal. More importantly than what do they think of it is what do I actually think of this? And I need another person there sometimes to actually know. Because there's accountability. When there's somebody there, there's accountability for what you've done. If it's just you, and it falls short of your ideals, and that gap is sizeable, there's nobody that you have to answer to. It's just you.

So I don't know. I hear about certain artists feeling that same way, and it's always really inspiring hearing about that. Hearing about artists that feel like they have a hard time listening to their own work, that are artists that I think of as gods, when you hear them say things like this, it humanizes them in a way that's really kind of inspiring and refreshing and reassuring, really. I think Randy Newman said something about, likened writing songs to going to work every day or going fishing or something. He still feels like, even after decades and decades of brilliant work, that when he sits down at the piano, he doesn't know that something's going to happen. He doesn't know that he can make something happen, even know. But he does know that if he doesn't show up to work, certainly nothing will happen. Or if he doesn't sit down at the piano, or put his fishing rod in the water, he's not going to catch a fish.

So it's nice when you hear people say things like this, rather than sometimes you hear, which is also true, from other artists that it's just kind of beamed to them and the faucet's always on. I think Joe Strummer said something like that once, too. He said, "We're not brilliant. We just work harder." Or something like that. He said, "Sam Cooke, he's brilliant. We just work harder. We just try harder." It's kind of refreshing when you hear that. These people that have reached the highest level of creative output still don't take it for granted or feel like it has anything to do with their god-given gifts. It depends. It's just like, if you put yourself in the game, then something might happen. But there's no guarantee of it.

**Matt:** I've heard that several times from artists in some way, where they talk about sort of a built-in humility toward the craft, or towards art, or the muse, or however they want to define it. But I've also heard some of the other side. Sort of a confidence. Some people have a swagger about it.

**Emile:** Which is also inspiring. It's just nice to know that there's no one way. Neil Young would say that he doesn't even bother trying to write a song unless there's a full moon out, and it just kind of tumbles out of him in real time. He'll write, like Mr. Soul, one of my favorite songs of his. The song is five minutes long, and it took him five minutes to write it. It just kind of came in that way. But then you hear like Leonard Cohen or Paul Simon or these people who are equally as brilliant, agonizing over lyrics and it taking them decades to write one song even, sometimes. So it's sort of like, oh there's no one way. But yet both things are inspiring, really, to hear.

**Matt:** I mentioned earlier, we spoke for the first time back in, was it 2015 or something. Your band, The Dig, had just put out a single called 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and that came after an EP, You and I and You, do I have that right?

**Emile:** Yeah, You and I and You was actually the short film that Terence Nance, this brilliant director, had made from two songs on the EP, but the EP was just You and I. We probably should have called it You and I and You. He was maybe ahead of the game. Ahead of us at the time. And forever. He's brilliant. But You and I and You, I think he improved the title of our EP for the short film.

**Matt:** That was the last time that I'd spoken with you. You've certainly come, or your resume is certainly broadened and is just so incredible since then with these works. I guess I wonder your relationship with the resistance maybe between the last time I would have spoken with you and now. In some ways, do you feel less resistance and however you would define that? Do you feel like it never changes, no matter the level of success and experience? Does it take different forms?

**Emile:** Yeah, great question. I think that having some time away from one medium and stepping into another medium can help you, has helped me creatively in a way that I'm really grateful for. Starting to collaborate more intensely or more often with visual artists and not only other musicians, I think has sort of opened things up creatively, to an extent. I think that that part of it is the tangible thing, is the real, the most tangible achievement, I think is like when some music you wrote found a home in somebody's work that's working on what you consider to be the highest level. Like these directors that I've been lucky enough to work with have been operating on the highest level. If music I have written has found a home in it, that's a real rewarding feeling and feels like a real achievement.

The other things I think are incredibly validating and exciting. Minari, for instance, having this response that it's been having with the Oscars and BAFTAs and the awards circuit has been incredibly exciting and sort of unexpected to have it be recognized by this community. But I think it's also like I'm trying to not lose sight of the collaboration in and of itself, and the work itself, connecting with people. It's like the most intoxicating and rewarding thing.

As far as it relates to the resistance, it's hard to articulate. I think, being a songwriter and switching over to this other medium in a way, has opened things up to an extent, because it's what they, because I don't identify really as a film composer. I've always wanted to do it, and I fell in love with film music at a young age, but I think sometimes for artists, myself included, the tricky part is to not get in your own way, and have your sense of identity somehow be a roadblock, or put too much weight on it. They call it in Buddhism the middle way. A friend of mine was telling me the middle way is when you show up and you care and you're working hard, but your identity isn't wrapped up in it so much so that you're freaking out about everything and trying to make everything into a masterpiece and then clogging the valves of your own creativity.

The only thing I think has changed in the last few years is just trying to stay out of my own way, and then also just the incredibly fortunate situation of having my music attached to the vehicle or the machine of a film, and have that vessel have it reach more people that way. Because I don't actually believe that there's a direct connection between great music or great art and success. I think sometimes you have both, but there's so many brilliant records, brilliant composers, brilliant films, that we'll never see and hear. I know already so many brilliant records that very few people have heard to believe that if something is truly great it'll break through. I don't really believe in that anymore. I think if you make music long enough, like the whole Randy Newman thing. If you go to work every day, and you go fishing every day, then you're more likely to catch a fish, both creatively and like as far as breaking through or connecting with audiences. But I don't think of it as a direct connection anymore. But it's all very elusive stuff. It's hard to wrap your head around all of it. I'm just really honored to be working on films as poetic and powerful as these.

**Matt:** You mentioned staying out of your own way. How successful are you at that now, maybe versus a year, three, five ago?

**Emile:** I don't know. It depends. I think something about accountability to somebody else, like accountability to a director or a film, you have less opportunities to get in your own way. You have to

deliver something, and there's deadlines, and there's other things to consider. It's sort of this sink-or-swim thing. You have a situation where you don't really have time to stand in your own way and overthink something and re-record it 5,000 times and question everything, because one, the timelines are coming fast and furious, the deadlines for what you have to deliver to a film.

But also, because if you send something to a director and they fall in love with it, then it's hard to try to beat it and beat it and beat it, because attachments start to happen. They're attached to a piece of music and it's working, so it's kind of like, don't poke the bear, in a way. And I think that whole don't-poke-the-bear thing can sometimes serve the music, because it's like you don't have time to kind of futz with it and sterilize it and scrub it of its character and its personality. But this is where I really struggle, because it's also very convenient to the lazy part of my creative brain, to be like oh, I'm not being lazy. I'm just not poking the bear. It's hard to navigate what is what. It's hard to decipher what's laziness and what's confidence and healthy confidence for your creativity. That's where I get lost sometimes in soup.

**Matt:** Sure. I wanted to ask. You mentioned several times in a positive way, which of course, working with some of these directors that you have, and the privilege it is and the beauty of this accountability, etc. But I also wonder, is there a shadow side there? I guess I'm trying to put myself in your shoes, thinking oh, this art that I'm creating isn't serving my own interests or ends. I've gotta serve the creative vision of someone else. And I guess I wonder for you, do you need a different outlet at times to have something that's all your own?

**Emile:** I do, yeah. It's a great question. I've never put out something that's all my own, within film or without film. With *The Dig*, it was a collaboration. It was four artists in a band, three songwriters. I see myself in a lot of it, and I'm incredibly proud of all of it, but none of it was completely my own, like a whole record completely my own. And with film, it's similar. It's in service of someone else's vision. It's important to me to make these, when I turn these scores into records for these films, that they feel like records that I would want to listen to, and that I'm proud of. I feel good about my name being on them, and I think I feel like a lot of it, I do feel connected to it.

But now I'm in a process of making my own record. I'm in the process of making two records: one with another artist that I love named Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith, that's sort of a collaboration. And the other one is a record that's just mine. And neither of them are attached to films. But the one that's just mine is terrifying for that reason. Because I mean talk about accountability, there's nobody to point to, you know what I mean? It's all on me. But it's scary and exciting, and I've always been in awe of performers, solo artists, that way. I've only once or twice in my life performed shows by myself. And it was terrifying and exhilarating. I think that I did it in a way that wasn't even promoted. It was just me in a bar to whoever was there. But I do feel the need to make things that aren't in service of something else. That are just sort of the end of the road.

**Matt:** What informs that? Because I'm hearing you say that, like it's terrifying, and I'm thinking, why do it? Certainly with your resume now, you wouldn't lack for work, working with other people.

**Emile:** Well I think the terrifying thing is the reason not to do it and also the reason to do it at the same time. I don't know. I also just, completely honestly, I just feel like there's the thing in your brain of wanting to have something that feels just like you. Yeah, you are putting yourself in a more vulnerable place, but I don't know, I think I love so many records that come from that singular place and aren't in service of something else. I loved so many things that are purely collaborative, but I feel like, I guess very selfishly maybe, I would like to be able to contribute to that world, too. Or to have my music, just to put something out there that's just me, would feel rewarding and new and satisfying.

But yeah, I know what you mean. I do wrestle with that. Because even just hearing you say that, I could shy away from it, and there would be nothing wrong with that either. I don't know. It's an exciting thing. And there's also ways that you can bring in, like I'm working with other people to produce my record and contribute and play on my record and things like that. I think it's like, you can have the collaborative spirit injected into the piece, into the work, but still kind of direct it or have it come from a singular place of just me. Driving the boat, or whatever.

**Matt:** Emile, thanks so much for your time today and making this happen. It's great to catch up, and certainly congratulations on the success of Minari. Yeah, hopeful for some Oscar wins there.

**Emile:** Thanks so much, man. And thanks for having me. This was really fun. It's good to have a bit of a brain buster. Like the questions are really interesting. That in and of itself is a little scary even sometimes talking about yourself in these terms. But it was fun and exciting, so thanks for having me. It was great talking to you.