

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 20

John Mark McMillan interview – Episode Transcript

Matt: Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner. Today, I'm privileged to chat with John Mark McMillan. John Mark, how are you, sir?

John Mark: I am actually wonderful. I'm doing really great. How are you?

Matt: I'm good, I'm good. That sounds very positive, in the midst of Covid days.

John Mark: It is. It is. I'm not positive about Covid, but I'm also taking it one day at a time, and I feel great right now.

Matt: I'm glad to catch you on a great day.

John Mark: Yes.

Matt: Hey, I know, you've already told me you're familiar with our source material. Just a reminder for our listeners, the whole podcast is centered on a book called *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield. And John Mark, I'd love to get you to respond to one of the opening lines of that book. It says, "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the un-lived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." I guess I wonder for you, how would you respond to that at this point in your career and life? What is that resistance for you these days?

John Mark: I think, oddly enough, the resistance for me is the balance of it all. I have a lot of opportunity, and I always feel super weird talking about it, just because some people's resistance is they literally can't figure out how to pay their bills. You know what I mean? And I feel like my challenge is, even though they're very real to me, I always want to be aware that there are people with real challenges in the world. But my challenges at the moment are figuring out how to make everything work together. My family life, my work life, my art, my writing, and my spiritual life, trying to figure out how to make these things all sort of coexist together, I think is really, really hard. So really, resistance for me a lot of times is, or I say the challenge for me really, is organizing it all.

I think there's an economy to life, right? In that you can do almost anything you want to do, to a point. Now obviously I was never going to be a professional basketball player. But there are things I could have done. You can do almost anything, to a point, but you can't do everything. I'm learning at this stage of life what matters the most out of all the things that I could do. Because there's a lot of things I could do, but if I want to do anything well, I only have so many years to focus on that one thing.

So deciding what that one thing is is hard for me. I think, I want to be a good dad, I want to be a good husband, I want to be a good friend. And then what do I want to do? Because being good at anything means giving yourself fully to it. And I have a friend who's a lawyer, and he's one of the smartest people I've ever met. And he's a lawyer, he lives in Manhattan. You can imagine how good at arguing you have to be to be a lawyer in Manhattan and be successful for any amount of time. They have 4 kids. He's a smart guy. And we were talking. I was like, he'll call me to talk, and I'll be like, man sometimes I feel so not smart talking to you. I was like, why do you call me? [laughs] And that wasn't a defense.

Matt: That's a vulnerable question.

John Mark: Yeah, he and I weren't arguing. I was just like, sometimes I wonder why. And he was like, "Well, there's a lot of different types of intelligence." He's like, "I used to work with this guy selling cars when I was young. I had a job selling cars." And he was like, "He was the dumbest guy in the world. He's like, but it must have been that all his intelligence was focused in one area, because I couldn't sell a car, and he was killing it." He said, "He must have taken every intelligent point he had and dropped it in the sell-cars-and-hook-up-with-chicks bucket. Because that's all he was good at." And this is coming from the most intelligent guy I've ever met.

Matt: John Mark, let me ask you. How old are you now?

John Mark: I am 40.

Matt: Okay. The reason I ask is because as you were talking, I heard some of my own internal language there, which was, like I'm 43, and something happened to me between 38-40 that, and then now I'm living it, and it's only more true now, where I feel like, I mean there's that whole mid-life cliché, and I haven't bought a car or anything like that, but there's this idea that I'm finding that turning 40 or being in that general zone was clarifying for me in a lot of ways. And not in like a morbid sense, like oh my gosh, life is so mortal and fleeting. I'm not freaking out at the lack of years I have left. I'm just aware of them, and then therefore it makes me want to, in a clarifying, cleansing way, put myself toward those things.

John Mark: Yep. One hundred percent. And also, I think when you're young, you know we have these ideas of success that we develop very early in life. And I don't think we realize how far we carry those things. We all sort of decide based on what happens to us when we're young. What success looks like. Does success for some people look like being connected to successful, powerful people? Or maybe success means looking special, standing out from the group. Or does success mean winning, being in charge, knowing that you are surpassing other people?

Because I was talking the other day to a friend of mine, and I was being really honest. We were talking about the tour shutting down, and how it affects people financially, and we've had to move our tour and cancel dates and reschedule dates and things like that. I was like, you know, if I'm totally honest, the money is obviously a challenge. That's definitely not something to ignore, but more than anything, I just wanted people to come out to my shows. Because that's what made me feel successful, is whether or not people showed up. And I realized I was willing to spend all kinds of money just to get people to come. I was like, that's really interesting. Because I have other friends who would be like, just do an acoustic tour and just make all the money. Who cares? Yeah, but you don't understand. This is what I need to feel important. [laughs] I need to prove to myself that people want to come see my rock shows. That's what matters to me. [laughs]

But I was very aware that oh, there is something. There is a lie that I've told myself that persists, even at 40 years old, that I need all these people. Because gosh, it's not just my ego. I'm going to be honest, it's not just my ego. I love playing. In fact, I think that there are things I love more than the ego boost. There definitely are. The connection with people and the expression and being in the room and feeling each other's presence as you sing and you make this music. And for me, it's not performing for a crowd. It's like this massive connection. Then you have the high for about an hour afterwards, and that's it. Like, okay, that was great. Now I've got to do it again, or I'm not going to be okay with myself. I realized, in that conversation, I realized what my motivation was, at least in the moment I had that conversation.

I was like, is this really what drives me? Am I really just trying to get people in the door? And so this phase of my life has really been about how do I bring actual value to people? How do I get beyond doing this for my own self worth? Am I doing it for my own self worth? Or my own sense of self worth. I've had to ask myself that question. Honestly, I have to ask myself that question constantly. We don't just

move from being young and ego-focused to being mature and less ego-focused. It's a process. Ego's always kind of hanging around with us. And in itself, he's not a bad guy. He just doesn't need to be driving the bus. He needs to be in the back of the bus, cracking jokes.

Matt: Somebody needs to revoke that license.

John Mark: Exactly. That guy needs to chill, because he drives way too fast, he takes way too many risks, and we like him because of what he brings to the table. He's encouraging. And he helps get things done. But at the end of the day, I don't want him behind the wheel. [laughs]

Matt: How do you parse what you're talking about? It sounds like it's all part of the same – if it was a plant, it would sound like all part of the same stalk. Because you were describing earlier, it sounded like what you were saying was, gosh, part of this is my validation, my need to be validated by a room full of people responding to the lights and the sounds and what I have to offer.

But what you have to offer is also the good side, right? If you say that with a different inflection, you're saying that's what you have to offer to the world, right? So you being you and expressing what you can only bring to a group of people to connect with them, to create community, to give them a moment, even music that lasts with them in meaningful ways and resonates with their experiences, all of that is so positive, and yet I wonder how you differentiate that, between your need for validation and doing what you're supposed to be doing.

John Mark: Totally. I think the way it works, I think it works a little bit like this. And when I say young, it's not a specific age, because it happens to people at all different times, but it generally goes from young, older to more mature. You usually don't move from more mature to immature, though that probably does happen sometimes to people based on decisions. I don't know. I'm not a psychologist. But I think at first you're building the ego. You're figuring out who you are, who you think you are, who you're supposed to be. And that's important because you need something to push against in order to grow. It's like lifting weights. But the weights on the bench are literally nothing. You're not doing work, you're faking work in order to build yourself up. And you need those muscles to exist in the world.

Then you reach a point when you're like, I want to move something. I want to actually use this thing to do something. And you start to maybe your ego gets hurt, or you start to see it for what it is. For me it was, I'm going to be anti-ego. I'm going to be the monk, I'm going to be the selfless, you know, which in itself can become another version of your ego. But you grapple with it. And then I feel like you come to the point where you're like, okay, this is me, and it's not the worst thing in the world. And I'm going to live with this. And instead of focusing, because phase two is still sort of a focus on the ego.

Phase one is you're building the ego up. Phase two is you're like, you're going to push the ego out the door. But you spend your whole life wrestling that thing to push it out the door when you could have spent a decade doing good things. So then you reach this point, which is where I feel like I am now, where I'm like, okay, I identify, ego's in the room. Hey bud, how're you doing, high five. How are you doing, what are you doing this weekend? Let's hang out. I'll talk to you later. Instead of trying to push the ego out the door, it's sort of like, admit that the ego is in the room, but my focus isn't on whether it's the ego or not. So I want to go do a show, and it's not like, if the show is going to make me feel great, and the show is going to validate me, I'm not going to stop it just because I don't want the false validation. What I'm going to do is I'm just going to shift focus where I don't really, it's not really about whether I am validated or not. It's about what I have to bring to the human beings who are in front of me.

And I feel like this is a new development for me. Because I went through the sort of self-flagellating sort of midlife crisis where I decided I was evil and I needed to destroy any idea of who I was outside of the

pure, true self. You know what I'm saying. How do I become like a Christlike figure in and of myself? Right? Instead of asking, how do I not be this ego-centric person, I should ask the question, how do I serve all these people in front of me?

So I started asking that question. And honestly I hit a wall probably a year ago. And I hit walls a lot. And to be honest, what I'm talking about here I feel like is a cycle that I go through. And I think I handle it a little better each time. But I hit this wall, and I realized, why are things not working? Why are things not working? Why am I not happy in my work? Why am I not connecting to people in the way that I used to or feel like I'm supposed to? And I realized, I had lost all of my vision. I had lost all of my vision, I think because of wrestling with this idea of who I am, and wrestling with the idea of the way I want to present myself. Early on, once again, wrestling to become something great, and later wrestling to sort of destroy that idea, because I was embarrassed or ashamed that I had been such an ego-driven human being. I got to the end of that process, and I didn't have a vision.

And I had to spend some real time asking myself, how do I even find a vision? What do I really even want to do? And I literally had a hard time answering what I actually even wanted to do. I spent some time. I read some business books. I read some psychology and had conversation with friends and watched Youtube videos and listened to podcasts, and I took notes. And I decided, okay I'm going to come up with a vision statement and a mission statement, even just for my sanity. Early on, they were so flaky. I have this friend, he's another lawyer. He lives in southern California. He's kind of my business mentor a little bit. He looks after me some. He's like, yeah send it to me and I'll look over it. And I remember sending him my first things. He's like, okay. I could tell, he's like, I have no idea what you're talking about here. You need to clarify what it is you're doing in the world.

But over time, it started to get clearer and clearer and clearer, even though I started with this super vague. And I was able to narrow it down to a single word, and for the first time in my life, I can tell you why I exist, why I do what I do in my work, in my community, and even with my family. I have a very distilled vision right now. It's not easy to do. I'm not saying it's simple. But I think for the longest time, I was focused on the wrong things. I was focused on me to be great, and then I was focused on trying not to be the egocentric human being that I thought I had been before. And I realized I was still focused on myself the whole time.

I'm not an anti-self person. The goal in life is not to be unselfish. The goal in life is to be giving, right? And in being giving, you become unselfish. It's kind of like light and darkness. Darkness literally isn't a thing. Darkness is literally nothing. Darkness is only the absence of light. Silence is only the absence of sound. Selfishness is really the absence of giving, the absence of good, the absence of putting yourself forth. So when you focus on whether or not you're a selfish person, I think it defeats the purpose, because you're still sort of focused on yourself. And maybe that's what it was for me.

And then when I decided to try and turn my energies and focus and figure out how to serve the world, because I do believe that I have talents. I do believe, I struggle in some areas. I've not always been the best singer. I'm not the best musician. But there is something I can do that I think not a whole lot of people in the world can do. And that's tell a story for a certain group of people who for some reason have connected with me on a heart level, and I owe them to give them my absolute best. And that doesn't mean I'm better than anyone else at what I do. It just means I've been given an opportunity and a place to speak into people's lives. And so I had to decide, what is it that I've been put on this earth to say to those people? And when I connected with that, something changed. All of a sudden, I had this purpose that I hadn't had before, and all of a sudden, energy picked up. In the process of creating a new album, I started to recognize my place as a leader and a servant, instead of just the artist.

In the past, I was like, I'm going to be the artist, and my business team, you guys are the business guys. I'm going to make the music, and you guys figure out how to pay for it. You guys figure out how to get it in front of people. But I realized that those aren't two different things. When I kind of hit a wall, I had to sort of change my entire business team. Not just on a whim. We'd been together for a long time, and it was just time for a change. It was really hard at first, because I had to take the lead in areas I hadn't been involved in for seven years.

So all of a sudden I was like, how do I deliver a song? I had to hire some help. But how do I connect with people? Why aren't people looking at my Instagram anymore? I don't know what's going on. I had to make some really big changes. But it was so good for me to be in that driver's seat, because it required that I have vision, and I realized I didn't have vision anymore. And going back to something I said earlier, the word for me that defines my life and what I'm called to do and what I'm here on the earth to accomplish is "re-enchantment" is what I'm calling it right now. I didn't coin that phrase. I didn't come up with that word. Someone on the internet said, "Sounds like what you're talking about is re-enchantment." I was like, "It is exactly what it is."

Matt: How would you define that?

John Mark: Re-enchantment. Well, I think that it comes down to gratitude. But for me, gratitude feels a little oversimplistic. Gratitude is like when someone does something nice for you, you respond. You say thank you. So gratitude was the original word. But I realize it's more than gratitude. It's more than just being kind. It's more than just being appreciative of the good things you have. To me, re-enchantment was about a new way to see the world. Like the whole world. So Einstein says that there are two ways to see the world. You can either see the world, he's like, you either see the whole world as a miracle, or you see the whole world as not a miracle. It's either all a miracle, or none of it is a miracle.

So digging into the deeper place in my life, I grew up in a community that is very miracle-driven. My dad is really big into faith healing. I love my dad. We get along real good. And I love that part of him. He's passionate about it. He believes in it. He wants to see people live better lives, and he prays for them, and he asks God to heal them. But I grew up in this sort of miracle culture, and I struggled with it. I really, really struggled with it.

I walked through this season of about 10 years where I almost completely lost my faith. I almost completely lost my faith. And I remember, and it's hard when you have all these people. And see this goes back to one of my original problems is how am I supposed to serve people when they come to me for answers about faith? This community comes to me for answers about faith, and I'm trying to be a servant here. And they come to me with questions about faith, and I'm secretly over here losing mine. Then what do I do?

Matt: Yeah, how do you give what you're losing?

John Mark: Exactly. And so part of it is I just talked about my faith and struggling with my faith. That's kind of another story. But I remember, oddly enough, I was sitting in a castle outside of London. I don't guess it's really a castle, but it's a manor. I mean it looks like a castle. But I was in a castle, it was like Harry Potter. I was sitting in a big armchair with paintings on the wall and a raging fire. I had met this Scottish friend who's become a friend of mine, and I don't know why. Maybe it's just me. Sometimes I'll open up to just about anybody. And I was just opening up to him about what I was going through, and I was like, whoa. I'm so stuck on all these things that I don't know.

Everyone wants to ask me what's real and what is true and what I believe, and I'm like, I want to believe all this stuff, but I just, I don't know. I don't know. And I'm sort of like celebrated as this Christian writer

who's written some songs that people all over the world sing, and they want me to write more, and they tell me how they've changed their lives and things, and I'm sitting here thinking, I'm glad they've changed their life, but I don't have anything to give you right now, because I'm struggling with disbelief. And I was sitting there having this conversation about everything that I don't know, and he said to me, "Well what do you know? How about focus on what you do know?" And it took me a year to process that, that conversation.

But I was sitting here today, thinking about that conversation, and thinking about, here's the thing about faith, is what I don't know is really not that important, because what I do know is so immersive. What I do know, I don't know, is immersive the right word? What I do know, I could give my life to what I do know. I could give multiple lifetimes to what I do know, and I would never run out. I wouldn't lose a minute. Here's what I do know. I know number one is that I am obsessed, I am totally infatuated with the forces that led me to exist. And I have been my entire life.

Number two is that I can't help but see those forces at work in all the human beings that float in and out of my life. And I thought the other day I was like, this is insane. Like, I lost my faith, not really, didn't really lose my faith, if you really want to get down to it, but I thought I was losing my faith, and I dug down to the bottom of who I was, and what's at the bottom of who I was?

What's at the bottom of me is I am obsessed with God. I love God. I'm obsessed with the powers that led me to exist. I absolutely love God. I'm not going to sit here and define exactly who and what God is for you in this moment. But at the very least, it means being grateful for the forces that led you to be. And then I see those forces at work in the people around me. I was like, are you serious? Did I just take the longest lap of all time and land right back on top of the two pillars of Christianity? I think I actually did.

Matt: But with clarity and with experience.

John Mark: Exactly. And that's re-enchantment for me. That's re-enchantment. Re-enchantment is realizing that every moment is a miracle. Every single moment is a miracle. Every person is a miracle. And not just so that you approach the world in a way that the world deserves. Not just that you treat people right. But because our time on this plane of existence is insanely short, and we're missing out on the greatest things if we haven't taken the time to realize exactly how miraculous it all is. That goes back to me growing up in miracle revival land. Everyone's pushing for revival. Revival, revival, revival. God's going to come, he's going to change everything, he's going to do the good. We want more. Those are worship songs we sing. "More, Lord. More, Lord."

And I realized I'm living in a miracle. And when I was younger, looking for miracles sometimes is also a distraction from living in the miracle that you're in. I'm not anti-miracle. I'm just kind of with Einstein here, that it's either all a miracle or none of it's a miracle. And that's what re-enchantment is for me. Can I make sounds through music that you feel, mostly with your ears, that trick you into feeling the reality of your significance in the universe? Can I do that? If I can, that's what I want to give my life to.

Matt: Why do you say it that way? Like trick people into something?

John Mark: Because art is always a trick. Picasso says that art is the lie that tells the truth. There's a misdirection that's required to help you see what's real. So in art, especially the visual arts, what a painter does, what a photographer does, for that matter, when you're looking at a photo, you're not looking at something real. You're looking at light that has left an impression, either digitally or on film. But you're not seeing an actual thing. So the role of the artist is to exaggerate a thing so that you will notice something that you didn't notice before. So you'll notice a very real thing, but you have to do something very unreal to your brain to distract you away from the things that are keeping you from seeing it.

I think Flannery O'Connor said, gosh, what is the great Flannery O'Connor quote about? "Because you're hard of hearing, we make loud sounds. Because you don't see well, we draw large, startling figures." Something like that. Well it's the same with art. I'm not trying to lie to you, but I am trying to exaggerate an aspect of the world for you, so that you will actually take notice of how good that thing actually is, because right now you're totally distracted by all the other things that are filling up your inbox, your Instagram feed. It's like, how do I get your attention? How do I catch your attention? And maybe that's what a painter does. Because you know painters and illustrators can illustrate, good ones can illustrate just like a photograph. But they don't, because they want to exaggerate features in order to focus your attention on those things.

Matt: Yeah. It sounds like then, to move around the intellectual use – I mean, I'm assuming a lot of what you're talking about is using emotion to do just that.

John Mark: Yeah. I think so. And music, there's some really interesting things that happen to your brain when you listen to music. If you've ever watched a film without the music, there's a massive, there's something that's missing from that film. And obviously, you can go on Youtube, and every idea that's ever been thought of is on Youtube, and you can find the intro to sitcoms, where they've changed the music. There was one, I'm trying to remember what it was. "What you talkin' 'bout, Willis?" What was that show?

Matt: Oh, *Different Strokes*.

John Mark: Different Strokes. And the intro, I don't know if you remember the intro to *Different Strokes*, but the rich old man, rich old white man is driving around in his Rolls Royce, and he picks up these two young African-American boys, and he takes them back to the place, and like the music that's playing is exciting. All of a sudden, these kids are going from rags to riches. But someone replaced it with really creepy music, and all of a sudden, you're like, what is he doing with these young boys? What is happening? Oh my gosh! And no one, and this is my point, no one told you to think different thoughts. Not for a second. All we did was change the music. All of a sudden the music has tricked you into a new posture towards what you're seeing. All of a sudden, you're not stoked for Willis and Arnold. They're shooting basketball and they're going up to the penthouse. They're living it up. All of a sudden, you're like, what's going on? Is this okay? Are they going to be okay? Why's this weird old man taking these kids away? This is weird. I'm scared, I'm scared!

Matt: It's a Jordan Peele movie or something.

John Mark: Exactly. But music can do that. Music has the power to do that, has the power to contextualize the brain and create a posture towards certain things. So it's the lie that tells the truth, in a sense. How do I posture you towards things that I know you want? How do I help you feel the reality of your significance in the universe?

Matt: What song best exemplifies that? As you wrestle with creating songs? You stumbled upon this word, re-enchantment, it informs what you do or what you want to bring to the world. Is there a song that best exemplifies, this is what I'm talking about?

John Mark: I'm not sure, you know, the whole new album, *Peopled With Dreams*, is more of my journey to this point. And I started to discover in the middle of the record what we're doing. That gratitude was the central theme. There's a song *The Road, The Rocks, and The Weeds*. The final verse is, "Shall I plant sequoias and revel in the soil of a crop I know I'll never live to reap?" It's hard to remember my songs when I'm not singing them. "And sow my body to my maker and my heart to my savior, and

spread me on the road, the rocks, the weeds.” And to me, the road, the rocks, and the weeds are the rest of life. They’re the rest of life. They’re the parts of life. It’s the resistance.

The road, the rocks, and the weeds are the part of life you put up with, that you deal with. And I noticed for the first time in my whole life that I was reading the parable of the sower. To me, all of a sudden it wasn’t significant that Jesus talks about spreading the word, the sower sowed the seed, and the seed was the word of God, and the word of God had to be Jesus, that’s what John says. In the beginning was the word. It’s not talking about the bible. The sower was not spreading the bible all over creation. The sower was spreading the word that John spoke of. It’s Jesus himself. Jesus, the image of the invisible god, God himself. He was spreading God around the world.

But early on, obviously we all think about the good soil, the ears to hear, but for a moment it hit me, what does this say of the sower that he also spreads himself out on the bad soil? I was like, that was significant and kind of beautiful. Because we spread our lives out, and we hope that we in this short time pour ourselves into good soil. But there’s kind of a beauty to being willing to be spread out also on the road, the rocks, and the weeds.

The road, to me, is significant, because I spend a lot of time on the road. A lot of time on the road. The weeds are significant because I spend a lot of time in the weeds. I’m up to my ears. [laughs] And the rocks are significant to me because I spend a lot of time beating the wall. But it’s kind of like if the maker is willing to be spread out on all the parts, then my life is okay. All that I’ve wasted on the road, all the time I spent in the weeds, all the bruises from hammering the rock, all of those things have a purpose.

And the beauty is that I’m in it with the maker. I’m not just here by myself. I’m not just wasting my own life. I’m wasting it with the creator. With the creation. With the universe. Now I sound like a Buddhist or something. I don’t know. I got lost.

Matt: I love it, man. I love it.

John Mark: But to me, that song is about gratitude. Finding gratitude in even the hardest places. Finding gratitude in the most difficult places in life. So that’s one of the songs that I think begins to express this idea of re-enchantment.

Matt: Yeah. John Mark, I’d love to give you the chance to tell us what’s coming up. I know that obviously quarantine has kind of canceled most normal activity that you’d probably tell us about on something like this. But are there livestream, are there other things that you could tell us about that you do know that are happening?

John Mark: Yeah, totally. We’ve moved all our tour dates to this fall. Obviously I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen. As of now we’re planning to do the tour in the fall if everything shakes out. So anyone who’s listening to this who bought a ticket, basically all the venues are the same, and all the tickets will transfer over. And you can check that out. Also, I’ve been trying to post a video a day on Instagram, and I’m posting them probably twice a week on Youtube, as well, just to give people an idea of what’s happening here in the basement. But also, I’m thinking about doing more with my newsletter, so people can follow me on any of those platforms to see what I’m up to. I’ve been writing some new music. It would be really great to be able to put out a handful of singles. I’ve got some live recordings I think we’re going to release in the next several months, and some remixes, and that kind of stuff. So we have some stuff coming that I’m excited about.

Matt: Nice. Nice. Well, John Mark, thanks for spending some time with us today and making this happen. Certainly all the best to you, and appreciate your time.

John Mark: Thank you so much. I love this conversation. I love the concept of the resistance, and War of Art is one of my favorite books of all time. So you got me pumped.

Matt: Great, man. Great. Hey, thanks again, appreciate it. All the best.