

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 23

Eric Hilton (Thievery Corporation) interview – Episode Transcript

Matt: Hello and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. Today I'm thrilled to sit down with Eric Hilton, part of the long-running, influential duo known as the Thievery Corporation, and who actually just put out his first solo album in a quarter-century? Is that right, Eric?

Eric: That's correct.

Matt: That's a long time.

Eric: Yeah, it was a long wait. But I always saved my musical efforts for Thievery Corporation. Because I felt so blessed to have a successful music project, I just didn't think I should dare step out of producing Thievery Corporation music to do anything else. But now I can't resist, so I'm doing a lot of solo work right now.

Matt: Well, I'd love to ask all about that, but with this episode, like all of our other episodes, I actually want to start, I'd love to get your thoughts or feedback on this line that comes from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. So let me just read this. "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the un-lived life between us. And between the two stands the resistance." So I guess for you, Eric, what I'd love to know is what does that resistance look like for you? Or just how would you respond to that at this stage of your career or life?

Eric: The first thing that comes to mind, it could be interpreted in so many different ways, but the first thing I think of is that I'm the type of person who wants to do a lot of things. I'm a bit of a busybody, dreamer, optimist, entrepreneur, artist, all kind of rolled up into one ball of energy. And I am faced with the reality, often, that I won't get to do a lot of the things that I want to do. We all probably feel that way. And sometimes I just get into scurry mode, where I'm trying to do so many things. And I have to remind myself that life is finite, and you really need to enjoy the present and not have such a thirst for a new conquest or new creation. Try to steady yourself. So I try to.

Matt: Is that something that you've always been tuned into, or was that a learned way of living and posture for you, at some point?

Eric: I think I've always been tuned into that a little bit, in my adult life, anyway. I can't remember. It's funny. You were talking before the interview about Eighteenth Street Lounge, and I remember this moment we were out on the sidewalk, my two partners and I. We were about to open in two days, and we were each talking about what we wanted the lounge to be like. What's it going to be? And I said, "The lounge is going to be famous." And they kind of looked at me strangely.

I didn't even really know what I meant, but I knew we were creating something really great. And then, in the 25 years that it was open, it did become famous, and Thievery Corporation was birthed out of the lounge. I met Rob there.

But it's funny, because I was working in the studio with Rob during the day, which was at the lounge, and then I would work at the lounge at night and often DJ. So I was always doing these multiple things. And I've just always been like that.

Matt: You were talking earlier about the solo release kind of coming after a quarter-century here. And I guess there's a real obvious question there of that tension earlier, where you said, basically, that you didn't want to mess with a good thing. Like why record outside of Thievery Corporation if it's going so

well? Does that mean that that impulse to record something under your own name was always present but shelved? Or did that emerge pretty recently?

Eric: I think it was shelved in probably mid-career of Thievery Corporation. Because Thievery Corporation has also been around for 25 years, and I think when Rob and I became bicoastal as a duo, Thievery Corporation became harder. And we definitely grew apart in a lot of ways, not personally but just in what we wanted to do. Because the studio was in Washington, D.C. and Rob was in San Francisco. Most of the music was being recorded in Washington, D.C. so that was difficult for Rob. I would work alone a lot, and he would bring amazing contributions to the records. We both toured, but I didn't really want to tour, because I didn't get into music to be a performing artist. I just simply wanted to make music. And that's my passion. But I love touring, too.

So that resistance, again, is probably facing the things that you have to give up, because you can't do everything. Nobody's that much of a superhero. So I couldn't open places like Eighteenth Street Lounge and record music, and then go out on tour. I'm not that gifted. So I had to choose. And I realized that if I tour, that's probably all I'll be able to do. And that's not my passion. So I had to choose my passion, which is making music, and also opening hospitality establishments.

Matt: I feel like maybe you gave me part of the answer when you just said, "I've got to follow my passion." But I wonder, certainly you're passionate about other things, too. So when you describe, "I can't do everything, so I've got to focus on what I can do," what's the divining rod, so to speak, for figuring out where exactly to place your energies, when maybe you have a passion for more even than what you can accomplish?

Eric: Yeah, that's a good question. It's difficult to answer. I don't know. We all have to make a living, and we have to try and pursue happiness. And hopefully we can combine those things. I think I have, to a great degree. But asking me today what I would like to do with every hour of my day would basically be make music and ride my bike and just contemplate. But that's not possible. Or maybe it is. Maybe I could do that. Maybe doing this first solo record and a couple of others, because I actually have two more coming out this year, which a lot of people think is bizarre. So I've kind of hit a stride with music, and it's possible that in the near future, I might just make music as my only occupation.

Matt: Just right now, when you said you have two other albums coming out this year, and you described the response as bizarre, what does that do to you?

Eric: Oh, I like it. I think it's just funny. As I get a little bit older, I just embrace being a bit eccentric. I'm just like that. Friends who know me know I'm kind of, sometimes they look at me like I'm crazy, because I have a lot of ideas. Not all of them are good. But I don't know. When I get into something, I really get into it. And right now, I'm into my solo music. I work on it pretty much every day. And I always said, you know it's funny. With Thievery Corporation, making the music was the easiest thing. It was everything else that was difficult. It was the marketing, talks, and dealing with record labels, and managers, and tour managers, and all of that. Making the music was like the sanctuary within the whole organism.

Matt: Did that ever get easier for you, dealing with the marketplace, or was that just always a frustrating hazard and remain so?

Eric: I think it's harder now. I'm trying to figure out the modern music industry. Fortunately for us with Thievery Corporation, we've worked with some really good people who kind of help us with that. It's a pretty complex landscape, though.

Matt: I read where you said about this new solo album, and apparently solo albums, that this is what you want to be doing, you said, “This is the next 25 years for me.” What does that mean, then, in relation to Rob and Thievery Corporation, and how do you handle the expectations of maybe what other people would want you to do, versus what you want to do?

Eric: Yeah, well that’s definitely been a really hard thing for me, and I realize that a lot of decisions that I make have an impact on other people who are close to me. So I don’t take that lightly. And I try to be a really good team player and consider the well-being of everybody. At the same time, you really do have to be true to yourself and do what you’re passionate about and follow your art as passionately as you can. So in terms of me and Rob, we’re very close friends, we’re good. This year, fortunately, we decided to take this year off from touring. We talked about maybe making some music together, but I think we’re each working on different things. So I think it’s a kind of healthy pause for Thievery, but we’ll see. We’ll see in the future what happens.

Matt: The music on *Infinite Everywhere*, and the forthcoming albums, are these compositions or even ideas that go way back, that you’ve returned to? Or do you realize, oh I’ve got this time to focus, like taking the year off, like you said, and create from there?

Eric: Yeah, no the stuff I’m releasing is all pretty much brand new, written and recorded in my studio. I do have kind of a treasure trove of older sketches and ideas that I worked on for Thievery Corporation. And I go back to them from time to time. I’m still kind of sifting through them and thinking, well, which ones are really special? Which should I complete? Right now, I’m just focusing on creating new material.

Matt: What are you finding that’s influential to you, or even inspiring to you, these days that maybe wasn’t true 3, 5 years ago?

Eric: I’m actually just enjoying becoming a better player. I was never a very good piano player, keyboard player. My role in Thievery Corporation, musically, was kind of beats and bass, rhythmic things. I would find really choice samples, write horn lines, writing all the bass lines. But I wasn’t really the melodies guy. And I’ve really kind of gotten into just playing and writing melodies more. I find that’s really opened up a new world for me, and I enjoy it.

Matt: Was there a surprise track on *Infinite Everywhere* that is most surprising to you by what comes out?

Eric: Hmm. No, not necessarily. I think more beautiful things, in a way, was kind of my first step at writing something in much more complex chord structures. I’ve found some really nice melodies for that. But no, actually it’s all been pretty effortless. That’s the great thing about music for me, is that I’ve never really found it very hard to do. So it’s an escape for me.

Matt: Does that mean you’ve never had a bout of writer’s block, as they call it?

Eric: Eh, for like a day. It doesn’t last long. I’m always thinking of different ideas, and you never know. You just don’t get frustrated, and you just kind of stick with it.

Matt: That sounds a bit outrageous for someone who’s been at it for 25 years, to say that writer’s block has only ever lasted a single day. Do you think that’s due to maybe an artistic viewpoint? Is it like a lens that you look through? Is there a way that you could analyze that in some way and come up with maybe why?

Eric: You know, it might just boil down to the simple fact that I don't spend all of my time making music, so that when I do, it's really special, and I might have built up some ideas. There might be some pent-up ideas that are just ready to go down. If I sat in the studio for 8, 9 hours a day, maybe I would experience more writer's block.

Matt: Is there something about the creative process that remains a hurdle for you today? Or are all the hurdles entirely on sort of that commerce, business, admin side?

Eric: I would say technology is both the gateway and the hurdle for me. Obviously, there's a lot more technology to make music now, and it makes things a bit easier, but I'm much more of a right-brain person, so kind of learning plug-ins and Logic Pro and computer programs isn't really my strong suit. So I actually still find myself writing sketches in Garage Band, just because it's so easy. And I'll take it really far, as far as it can go in Garage Band, and then I'll have my engineer, Igor, help me dump it into Logic and finesse it. I could probably learn how to do all that and get better in Logic, but I'm just very right-brain oriented, and I find that it's almost painful to switch from left brain to right brain, back and forth, so many times. It's like the little bridge between them gets worn out.

Matt: Eric, I wanted to ask about a different angle here on the new release, which is, when you've been making music under a banner like Thievery Corporation for so long, I would think it would maybe feel vulnerable to step out and say, "Hey, this is just me. And it's my name on it," versus maybe something that you could, I don't want to say hide behind, but certainly it's not as personal as saying it's Eric Hilton. What does that feel like? What's your relationship there? Does it feel more vulnerable, or no?

Eric: It felt absolutely vulnerable. I'm actually still a bit on a high from the release last Friday, because I was just so overwhelmed, really with happiness, that people liked the record. And it resonated with them I believe the way it resonated with me. Because I like to write music that kind of evokes emotions, and that to me is what I'm chasing. And I had no idea what people would expect, how it would hit them, what they would say. My music sounds a lot like Thievery Corporation. There's no coincidence there. I thought maybe they'd say, "Oh this sounds just like Thievery," or "This isn't Thievery. This isn't as good," or who knows. But really, everybody had great comments. And the reaction was excellent. I'm just still so happy about that. Because I told Igor, my engineer, I said, "You know, this made me realize that I can do this now. I can continue." There is a connection between what I like and what the listener likes. So that's a great thing.

Matt: How pronounced were those doubts before the release?

Eric: I just stuffed them back down every time. They would come up daily. But I was all in. I want to be a solo artist as well as one half of Thievery Corporation. And I'm all in. So I'm casting that die, and that's just it.

Matt: Basically what you just said about doubts kind of leads me in a way. Because you have this other quote that I just loved. You said, "I don't entertain defeatism." And you just talked about really your focus on positivity and perseverance. I guess I just wonder what informs that. These are very easy days to be down, and very easy days to then express something from that. But this record is positive. This record is definitely a beautiful album that uplifts. So when I read that, I thought, I wonder what informs that, and then I wonder how hard it is to maintain that.

Eric: Yeah, well, I don't know. I think it just boils down to what energy do you want to expose yourself to, and in turn interact with so you could have some of that same energy? These days, there's a lot of people who are down about really things outside of their control. And I feel like people are almost, some people are almost acting in a way where they're being tormented, and it's hard to watch. And honestly, I

just feel like the world goes through ups and downs, and there's always going to be plenty of terrible things, and there's always going to be plenty of beautiful things. It's just not going to change. So the only thing we can change is our reaction to it. And I don't know, I just try to connect with what I feel are good forms of energy. I know that sounds easy. It might even sound like a cop-out. But there are plenty of people out there who are, I don't know, they feel like they're at war. And frankly, I don't want to be at war, with others, with myself. Eckhart Tolle, he escaped to the park, and I think he sat in the park for like a year before he started writing his books. I can understand that sometimes. Just kind of sit back and be quiet and observe, and I don't know. That makes sense to me.

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