

## The Resistance Podcast // Episode 27 // William Fitzsimmons

**Matt:** Hello and welcome to The Resistance. I'm thrilled to be joined today by someone who I've actually been chasing for this podcast for quite some time. William Fitzsimmons, how are you today?

**William:** Hey Matt. I'm good, how are you doing?

**Matt:** I'm good. I'm good. I know we were talking earlier, but just to explain to others, William we've chatted several times over the years.

**William:** Yes.

**Matt:** And when we launched this podcast, I've been in music journalism of some kind for a good two decades, and you just one of those people that, every time we talk, it's always a sort of diving into the deep end of the pool, so to speak. And so launching this podcast, just made sense to talk to you. So I appreciate you taking time out.

**William:** Well I appreciate it too, Matt. Thanks.

**Matt:** Well, William, I'd love to just dive in where we start every one of our episodes, and that's by referring to our source material, Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art*. And Steven writes this, so I'd love for you to respond. "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the unlive life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." At this stage in your career or life, how does that strike you? What does resistance look like?

**William:** Yeah, it's funny. I had not heard that quote until you sent it to me. And obviously with my background in psychology, I've spent a minute or two thinking about what the self means, what the ego means, what it means to have an internal self. There's the theory of multiple selves, that we're sort of someone internally, and we're someone different when we're with different people in different roles, and things like that. The thing it reminded me of most, and I'm doing a great job of not responding specifically to the question, which I love, but I'll get around to there. Gestalt psychology, which was pioneered by a guy named Fritz Perls, really smart guy. Basically, he talked about health being the degree to which your internal and external self are lined up. So the first thing I thought of was Perls, and I thought of Gestalt psychology when I heard that quote. The way to reduce that resistance is to line up your behavior with your beliefs, essentially. That's what he thought. That was the idea, the theory.

I love that theory, and to get back to the *War of Art* quote, I don't think it's ever perfectly possible. I actually think the resistance between those two things is kind of necessary, that that friction helps us be creative. And we do that by constantly remaining aware of that difference. That I'm not maybe always living to be the person that I want to be, or that maybe that's not even possible, if that makes sense. So I don't think lining up those two is actually a goal in and of itself. I think it's good to try to kind of shoot for that in general. That's sort of the target area.

But for me, as I've taken on new roles in my life, as I became a father, as I've been through a couple divorces, you know, life experiences, the target has kind of moved and I've had to place

myself as a creative person in new contexts. What does it mean to be a songwriter at 22, when you're single and you don't have kids, and you're just starting out? And what does it mean when you're 42, and you have children, you have shared custody, and you have child support, and you have back pain? It's a different thing. So I don't know if that's making sense, but I actually, I think the resistance is actually kind of lovely. And I welcome it now, where I used to think the goal was to fight it, that I should grab my sword and my shield, but I don't want to fight it anymore. I kind of want to welcome it. Because I think it sort of helps me actually be a better writer.

**Matt:** As we're talking, it occurs to me that you're referring to it in these vague ways. Like "it." "I want to welcome it." And yet I think for some people, their "it" may be different from you. So when you say you welcome it, what form are you talking about? Are you thinking of something specific in that way when you're referring to it?

**William:** I would say, so the "it" that I'm talking about is reality. It's the external truth that exists regardless of what I think. And I'm getting more vague now, but I'm not a relativist. I think that truth is actually a thing. We don't always maybe know exactly what it is, but I think it's actually a thing. So I welcome reality when it comes. A good example of when I didn't welcome it was when my second wife told me that our marriage was over. That was reality. I couldn't – I tried for about a year to alter that reality, to change it, to make it false, but it didn't work. Because I was pushing up against what was actually true. In that sense, the resistance was, it was nice to have the friction, because it did two things: It helped me be more creative, but it also helped me to find peace, because it was instructive. The reality pushed back against my efforts to push it away. I wanted my wife to say, "No, wait. I was wrong. Our marriage is great. Everything's fine. Never mind." But that wasn't the case. Our marriage was actually sick.

So what I've learned with a whole crap ton of therapy, and a lot of reading. Anthony DeMello is one of my favorite authors, who was a Jesuit priest and a spiritualist and a writer. And he talks a lot about reality acceptance kind of being the key to happiness. That happiness is sort of already, this gets a little bit goopy, maybe, no offense, Gwyneth.

But we already have the ability to be happy. External things don't cause or diminish happiness. It's already within us. We have the ability to kind of choose that and live that out. And ironically, I was pushing for a thing that was only going to cause more unhappiness. I was trying to save a diseased marriage. I don't think it's bad to try to save a marriage, but in this specific scenario, the marriage itself was already over.

So I wasn't actually at peace, and I wasn't really happy until I chose to accept that reality. And man, once I was swimming in that stream, of like this is where it is, this is what life is right now, that you're 40, you have kids, you're only going to see them half the time, there's going to be a child support check taken out every month, like once I accepted all of that, I was actually okay. So I don't know. Sometimes it's good to fight, and sometimes it's good to sit back and just sort of let things happen as they're happening. I don't know.

**Matt:** How do you know? Because there are creatively moving pieces of art formed in the fighting for and the victory. And there are others now that you're describing on the other side. Let's say you're fighting for that marriage, and let's say she does change her mind, and yet

you're inspired there to write about what's fought for and won, and that spurs that creativity. Yeah, I'll leave it at that.

**William:** That's a tough one. I think the neat thing about writing in general, or any kind of creative outlet, is that it doesn't have the same rules that normal social convention does. It's a playground, and you get to play. My six-year-old is always asking me to play pretend with her. And as a 42 year old man, I find it to be the most insufferable thing to play pretend, and I don't know why it annoys me so much. She's like, "Okay Daddy. You're the king and I'm the princess." And I'm just like, goddammit, please don't make me do this. Please. I will do anything but this right now. I will go clean all the toilets. And I don't know why.

That's something I probably need to dig in a little deeper, but I do like the thing where you can play with fantasy inside of writing, that you can, even though I was accepting, or I was learning to accept the reality of my marriage being over, it was actually healing for me, I don't know why, but it was healing for me to have fantasy elements in there of imagining different scenarios. And the whole time I was aware. I knew that it wasn't true. Like "Angela," I have a song called "Angela" on the *Mission Bell* record, my last record, and the chorus is, "Wherever you go, I will find you." And that was a love song. And it was a love song written at a time when I knew it probably was never going to come true.

So in that sense, it's fake-ish, but something about being allowed to just fantasize for a moment, just for the 4 minutes of that song, that maybe it will be okay. Something about that was curative. It helped me let it go. Just sort of look at both sides of the coin. When do you go too far into fantasyland? Because then you're talking about legitimate mental illness, which I've struggled with, too. I don't say that flippantly, either. It's hard to know. Maybe we only know after the fact. Maybe it's only a hindsight thing.

**Matt:** I would think, yeah. That was my first thought was probably only when it's all said and done for that chapter.

**William:** When it's all said and done. Right. Then you get the clarity. Yeah.

**Matt:** William, you detailed, a songwriter at 22 is different than being a songwriter at 42. And I wonder what resistance you faced as a 22 year old that is still there for you now. And what part is just in the rearview mirror?

**William:** The resistance at 22 was that everything had to be cool. It had to be current, it had to be hip. It had to be relevant. This idea sort of encompassed everything. This would have been my aesthetic and the things I said in interviews, the words I wrote in the songs. Even the chords I would use.

I remember, I think it was on Twitter, I feel like it was either Justin Vernon, you know from Bon Iver, or forgive me, who's the wonderful lead singer of the Fleet Foxes? I can't remember his name. It doesn't matter. He's fantastic, though. Both amazing, amazing writers. But one of them tweeted and the other responded about a chord. They were making fun of a chord. And it's a G shape, like a normal cowboy chord G shape, but with the ring finger on the B string, on the third fret. It was either that or it was a C, in a similar structure. And I remember reading that and

feeling like an asshole, because I loved that chord. And they were saying how lame that chord is. And that's awesome. If they want to believe that chord is lame, I respect both those guys a lot. I'm a fan of their music and their writing. But I stopped playing that chord for a little while, because I was like, aw crap. I really like these guys. If they say it's not cool, I guess I can't do it anymore.

So that's a good example of how I felt in general when I first started writing. That I needed to fit some sort of a mold of what a cool songwriter was. Whereas now, and part of it's just a result of age, of your kids being honest with you about you smelling in the morning, or just having like kind of humbling experiences. I've had more rejection than I've had success at this point, artistically. Even the most successful people, that's probably been the case for them, too. And now, I just don't give a shit. I love that chord. I love that it sounds cheesy, and that it sounds saccharine. I think that's why it's great. So you know what? I could give two shits if you don't like it. It's a great chord. I'm going to play the chord.

**Matt:** Was that their argument, that it was sugary in some way?

**William:** Yeah, it was, I don't remember exactly. I think they might have – it is kind of a youth groupy chord. I feel like it probably shows up in every single praise, and there's some really good praise and worship music. Don't get me wrong. But I feel like it shows up in like every single cheesy Christian youth group song you've ever heard in your life. So they do have a point.

**Matt:** You're describing much more of my background than you probably know.

**William:** Oh that's my childhood, too, man. For sure, yeah. But you know what I mean? It's not about like, "I don't care what anyone thinks." That's not what I'm saying. I do care what people think. Part of my process is wanting to help and entertain or whatever it is, the people that like my music. I don't want to be Bob Dylan and just offend people that are my fans. But finding that balance of am I being authentic to who I'm supposed to be as an artist? Talking about that other self. And at the same time am I respecting the people that have supported me for my entire career?

**Matt:** When you said, "I don't give a shit anymore," when did that happen for you?

**William:** That's a good question, man. Probably after the Lions record. That was in 2012, I think. That would have been my maybe fourth record. Coming off my third record, which did really well, and had all kinds of cool stuff happening. The video premiered on MTV, songs on that third record were on a bunch of TV shows and all that shit. It seemed like there were people who were kind of whispering like "dude, this is your moment, bro. This is it. You're about to blow up." And I bought into that. And I don't even think it was about money or fame.

I think everybody likes being recognized for doing a good job. A kid likes a pat on the back or a kiss on the head when they do a good job. I'm not immune to that. That feels really good when somebody says, "Man, that sounds really nice." That feels really good. I'm not going to throw that away completely. I'm not going to be defined by that person's opinion. But it does feel good. But the Lions record, it's not that it did bad, but it did not perform anywhere near what I thought

it was going to do. Not even remotely close. I don't even know if it got any placements on anything really meaningful. The numbers, music sales were down in general anyway. But the point being it underperformed what I thought it was going to do. And I was kind of crushed about that. Because I thought that record was really, really good. I'm not fishing here. And I still think it's good. But that was a moment when reality kind of smacked me in the face and said, "Dude, if your metric is streams or sales or how many commercials use your song or something like that, then you're not only doing it for the wrong reasons, but you're always going to be unhappy." I just had to fucking wake up. I had to wake up and realize I was doing it a little bit for the wrong reasons, I guess.

**Matt:** But you have to care about those metrics in some way, given that it's your livelihood.

**William:** Well, there's another resistance piece. I'm not doing this for vanity. I don't have a trust fund. One of the reasons I make music is to take care of my children. I would never lie about that. I believe in my art, but make no mistake. This is how I feed my kids. So those metrics, they do matter to a degree, but I feel like with that record, we kind of tried to make it really palatable. It wasn't an 80 mile per hour down the middle strike. It was still me. It was still folk music. It was still kind of dark, and all that stuff. But I did make some concessions on that that I thought would have worked. And when I saw that they didn't really work, I was like, well forget it then. I'm just going to make exactly what I want to make, and then we'll figure it out later.

So I guess I just, I can't worry about it. It ends up being an inverse relationship. If you try to make something kind of a down the middle pitch, so to speak, that would be very well accepted, even if you succeed, it probably isn't going to have a lot of heart to it, unless that's where your heart is. If your heart's right down the middle, then go for it. But it's just not for me, man.

I make, fuck. I make sad music. It's just what it is. And I probably always will. And I don't really care. I think that's what I'm supposed to do. So why would I not do that? "When are you going to make a happy record?" I don't know. Never? It's not what I do. Go listen to Jason Mraz, man. Dude's got happy songs all over the place, bro. So many of them. Enjoy. And I'm not even being an asshole. I'm really not. Jason Mraz is really talented. He entertains a lot of people. But I'm not Jason Mraz, dude. I don't make happy songs. If you want that, go somewhere else. Enjoy. I'll be sitting here with the people that want what I do.

**Matt:** I love that realization, because the very first time we talked, which was forever ago, you said, I think you were coming out of your first divorce. And you had returned to make sad songs, and I think you had said like, "I didn't want to do this again," but you had gone through something that made you return there. And you were like, "Someday I won't. I want to move past this." And then to hear you now, there's just a real sense of kind of having found your space and owning your space. It's just interesting to hear your growth, is all I'm saying. There's not a real question in that.

**William:** No, no, no. And I appreciate that. I really do, Matt. Thank you. And I can't take a lot of credit for it. A lot of it was just things that happened to me. It was kind of, not that I was forced into that position, but it's a limitation if you want to call it that, even. I can't do upbeat, happy stuff. I mean, we try to do things. The new record hasn't come out yet, but it's finished. It's mixed and everything. It has a lot more life and vigor to it than anything we've done before. And

my producer, Adam Landry, that I love so much as a human, and I trust him as an artist, as a producer, as a friend, he heard different things in the songs than I did. He heard more rhythm. More tempo. More aggressiveness. Things like that. And that's part of his job is to take what I do and kind of flush out different emotions than what I'm hearing.

So I'm open to altering the formula, so to speak. Like I don't sit down and think, "Now I'm going to write a William Fitzsimmons song." That's not what I do. But it is going to be a William Fitzsimmons song when it comes out. I don't see a lot of point in sitting down and trying to do something different for its own sake, per se. I mean I'll do different things.

I've been practicing piano for the last two years, because I want to get better at piano. This song, I wrote a lot of the songs on the piano and the synthesizer, because I thought that would be a neat challenge for me. I think I remember reading that Thom Yorke asked all the guys in Radiohead before I think *OK Computer*, to learn one new instrument before they even went in the studio. Just as a way to stretch, as a way to make sure they weren't just making the same record every year. And I love that. I think that was really neat. They weren't trying to be, like reinvent themselves. They were just trying to be more developed versions of who they already are. That's what I'm shooting for, man. And my heroes have done that, too. Mark Kozelek from Sun Kil Moon, Red House Painters, big, big writing hero of mine. He doesn't have the best reputation as a human.

**Matt:** But certainly as a songwriter.

**William:** As a songwriter, yeah. You can't deny what he does. And I mean, I would challenge somebody to look at his catalogue and say that he's writing in vastly different emotional space than he was 25 years ago. He's not. He's grown a lot as a writer. The last 5, 10 years he's written some of his best stuff ever. But he's kind of still in that ballpark. And that's badass, man. Because that's where he is. Let him do it.

Or someone like Sufjan, that Sufjan goes around the world and comes back again. We kind of thought, as fans we sort of thought that we would never hear a record like Illinois again. And they did the BQE and the Age of Adz, and this sort of left field stuff, and then he does Carrie and Lowell. And you're like, oh shit. This is like 10, 11 songs of my favorite songs from Illinois. But I love that he didn't just make another Illinois. Because I think that's what a lot of people would have done. And how can you blame him? He had like a gold record that was a masterpiece. Why wouldn't you? Just do it again, bro! Just do it again!

**Matt:** Just pick another state, man.

**William:** Pick another state. Change a few chords. Throw the banjo in there, do the whole thing. Man, you fucking, you got another gold record, bro! He was like, "No, I'm all right. I'm going to write an orchestral piece about a highway in Brooklyn." I love that so much! I love that.

**Matt:** Earlier, you said, you were describing resistance at 22 versus resistance today, and that you don't care about anymore. Is there something today, at 42, that you wished you didn't care about so much?

**William:** The first thought that came into my head, Matt, was money. But I don't know if that's actually true. I think it's actually not a bad thing that I care about money. And I'm not talking about how I'm so close to buying that new boat I wanted. I'm trying to make sure I can continue to take care of my kids well, and pay the rent and all that stuff.

I have it a lot better than a lot of people. I'm not trying to be – I hope that's not offensive. But I like that being a consideration. I actually think that makes me have to work harder to be an honest writer. Because you always have those moments of temptation. That bright, shiny red apple is kind of presented to you by the snake, so to speak. And it's like, oh man dude, if you just said this line instead of that, somebody could use this for a wedding song. Aw man, this would work really well in a Subaru commercial. And I like having to wrestle with that. I think that actually makes me a better writer. That's me, personally.

There are writers that, like LeBron James is a good example. LeBron James has all the money in the world, but I don't think that's what's actually driving him to perform. I think he's performing because he wants to be the best basketball player that's ever lived. And the money to him, I think it's probably great. It's great to not have to worry about it. But that doesn't seem to make him lazy at all. It seems like when he goes out there, when he trains in the gym, he works as hard as anyone ever has. So maybe for me it's necessary. Maybe I need to be, in order to be a good writer, I need to have to wrestle with that, every single line, every single chord. Am I doing this just to make money? Or am I doing this because it's the right thing to say?

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