

The Resistance Podcast // Episode 28 // The Naked & Famous

Matt: I'd love to start our podcast where we always start. We have source material from Steven Pressfield's book *The War of Art*. I just want to read this line, and really, Alisa, you or Thom, either one of you can kind of choose to be the first to answer, and then we'll just take it wherever it rolls from here.

The quote goes like this: "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'd love to get from either one of you, to start, what you do with that quote. How does that feel to you to have the life that you're living and the life that you're wanting to live, and the tension or the resistance that you feel there. What does that look like?

Alisa: Oh, man. This resonates with me so deeply right now, because at the moment, I am unable to go to sleep at night. I'm not falling asleep as well as I used to, because I think about all of the things that I am yet to do. The songs that I'm wanting to write, the songs that are unfinished, the projects that I'm wanting to pursue, and just my mind just starts spiraling. I just have to take Xanax to help me sleep. So this is actually where I am at this present moment. So this resistance in my waking life and in my interior life are definitely at odds with one another at the moment. So I'm kind of working through it right now.

Matt: Thom, what about for you? Are you relating to that like she is? Are you feeling in a better, a less frictional period?

Thom: That's very kind of you to assume, but I think I'm worse. I think I'm worse. And I've always been like that, and I think I am constantly, I don't remember a period of my life in which I have felt any kind of real satisfaction or peace or any kind of genuine happiness. I think I've always been dreaming about things I wanted to do, imagining stuff that I should have done, regretting failures and looking backwards.

Yeah, I think I'm a pretty deeply sort of depressive person, and yeah so that to me, that's almost like the icing on the cake, that statement. I do definitely relate to it. I think for me, being an artist was very much a manifestation of that. I couldn't bear the idea of having a regular job, of doing a normal thing with my life, and I think I was just absolutely miserable about normality as a child, and then as an early adult and a teenager, I just, I was so depressed by the prospect of normal life. And all I wanted to do was do whatever I wanted, and I had this kind of belief in music that it was going to give me this purpose and meaning and this other-ness, and it was going to be this adventure. Yeah, so I think I have always been living that kind of sentiment and that statement.

Matt: Is that common ground for you both to stand on? Do you talk internally about kind of being in that same place, or is this pretty different for each of you?

Thom: It's weird. I don't think we talk about it at all.

Alisa: I think it's just kind of unspoken and I guess some days when Thom and I have to do something, finish something, or we schedule to write something, it's kind of just this unspoken thing that we work out in the room. He might be having a day where he's just feeling this so deeply, and I'm kind of like on the other end of it, and I'm like, "What's wrong with you? Why aren't we moving quick enough? Why is this day moving so slowly? Why are the ideas just like coming out so slow? I don't understand. Is there something wrong?" And I think we forget that

we both deal with this internally, and we never actually speak about it. I speak about it to my other friends who are musicians and artists, but oddly don't speak about this with Thom.

Matt: Let me ask this. And I know kind of, I know part of this already because all of us have even talked about this new album before, so I know this was really a tumultuous time, but this makes me curious about, like when you each referred to where you're at with resistance right now, how much of that is made more difficult because you're working these things out creatively with someone else, and how much of it is actually helped because there's a bit of community here, within *The Naked and Famous*?

Thom: I'm not sure, to be honest. I feel floored by the question. I don't know that I deal with it. That's really, do you think that's at the core of what you're asking? Whether we cope with it somehow, or address it? Because I –

Matt: No, please continue your thought. I'll follow up if I need it.

Thom: I don't know if I do. I think I'm just repeating myself. I'm not sure if I address it. I feel like music has not given me those big answers. It's given me like a life that I feel less depressed by, for sure. I feel very privileged and very lucky and very grateful to be doing what I'm doing. But it hasn't gotten rid of, or provided me with any kind of antidote to that. It's almost, was it Socrates, the unexamined life? Am I attributing that quote to the right philosopher? I'm not sure music has made me feel any more at ease about the ideas about the life that I think I'm supposed to be living or that I want to be living, and it feels like an endless chase. Oddly, I think getting rid of that feeling is probably something that maybe meditation or mindfulness or stoicism would help more with, but I don't know if I have the patience for that, so I think maybe art is the next best thing. I'm not sure.

Alisa: I feel like the resistance in our creative partnership is difficult, and it has actually impaired us and aided us at the same time. Thom and I both have very strong ideas on how we think songs should be finished and written, and we will fight tooth and nail for our ideas, for the best idea to win at times, and then again, that kind of drive and ambition really impairs our process as well. So it's like a never-ending merry-go-round that we're on. Some days are really good, when Thom and I are on the same page, and there is no resistance in sight. But it's just so, this kind of word, it really does embody a lot of our process for us. The making of *Recover* was so, so difficult because of that.

The worst part of the process for both of us during the making of this record was when I just felt like we weren't being very nice to each other and decided that we needed to just press pause for a few months and just think about how we would move forward, because we had hit this impasse, and neither of us could agree on anything or get on the same page. That was the biggest resistance during the period of time we were making this album. Getting through it, we just fought for the best, what we thought were the best ideas, and that is now our album.

Matt: Was "Recover" the cornerstone track there? The actual song itself?

Thom: Yeah.

Alisa: Yeah. Yeah, it was.

Matt: How did that present itself in a way that you're like, ah, here we go?

Alisa: Well, all the months leading up to that point that we were writing songs for our record, I threw some pretty bold statements towards Thom, and we had to go through some growing pains. You know, I said to him, “I really want to make this record with you, but if we make another record like the last one, I’d rather not make one at all. We need to evolve, and we need to grow, and however we’re working at the moment, I just feel like we’re not heading in that direction.” So me just throwing that kind of big bomb in the room really helped us kind of like move in that direction and recalibrate. And so we had a lot of days where we would just write in the studio and have a song at the end of the day, and I would just feel like this was not the place that I wanted to go for us creatively. And when we begun cowriting and working with people that were kind of bolstering us creatively and supporting our vision and knowing that we wanted to move in a fresh direction, and the people that we were working with knew our dynamic, that was really paramount to the process. We ended up writing Recover. And that was just like such a breakthrough, having other people in the room and reinvigorating our creative process was so massive for any kind of improvement, I guess is the word.

Thom: I want to say that it was the moment where, each record that we’ve made, there’s one song that I feel like I can highlight that was a real moment of inspiration, where one of us, well I mean I feel like I can highlight Alisa’s ones more, because I’m on the receiving end of them. I get to witness them happening. There’s just these moments of just pure inspiration. I feel really confident that this is where the vast amount of significant pieces of art and music, this is how they happen. They’re not discussed. They’re just kind of pulled out of the ether, and they come really, really quickly. You don’t sit there kind of laboriously talking about this kind of song you want to create and the kind of mood that you want to express and blah blah blah. You just kind of get fixated on an idea, and you just kind of go. It all comes out. The first version of that was Young Blood. It was like zero discussion. I wrote the song, she wrote some lyrics, I wrote some extra lyrics, we recorded it, boom. It was done. No discussion, no like “should we slow it down, should we speed it up, what do we want to say?” It just came out.

And then “Recover” was like this as well. Alisa just wrote this song in her head when she was driving to the session that we were going to start the day, and she kind of burst into the room. She was like, I’ve got it. I’ve got the song for the day. Sings the chorus just like in the doorway, and that was it. We just immediately finished the song in a matter of hours. Honestly, the song was written, produced, practically recorded, probably in under five hours. And that’s like it. And then we come back and we do re-records for a really perfect final vocal or one of the instruments, maybe we did a bad tambourine in it, so we redo the tambourine, but pretty much the song is there.

Every record of ours has one of those songs, where it’s just like, ‘Yep. That’s it, that’s the kind of centerpiece.’ And yeah, I feel like I’ve heard a lot of stories about tracks like this that come together, the last song to get finished before the album comes out in like a month, and it ends up being the single or something like that. So I feel like these moments of real inspiration are always special. They’re very memorable. And you can’t teach them. That’s the tricky thing. You can’t learn how to do that in school.

Alisa: I also had a lot of apprehension about this song being the centerpiece. And Thom and my management were both like, “Alisa, what’s wrong with you? This makes so much sense. This makes so much sense to be the album opener, this makes so much sense for the title of the record.” I’m like, I don’t know. It’s just, it’s so vulnerable. I just wasn’t able to see beyond that at the time. But eventually I came around, and there you have it. But yeah.

Matt: Does that feel congruent with other times, though? When those things have proven true, when it's this anchor piece that's meant to be the theme of the album or the opening track, or whatever, are those usually the most vulnerable moments, the ones that feel kind of, that there's some resistance to even putting it out there in that way?

Alisa: Oh, absolutely. There have been so many moments in our career where we've written a song, and I have that feeling of like not knowing what I'm doing. Feeling like I'm treading ground that I've never tread before, and that feeling is often associated with something really good. When we wrote "Young Blood," the way I'm singing in that track is a signature identifier of our band. Before that, I was really into listening to Fiona Apple and PJ Harvey and Feist, and they all have kind of this jazzy, low timbre in their voices.

The day that we wrote "Young Blood," Thom was like, 'Hey. I want you to try and sing this loud. Just reach for the rafters when you sing this.' I'm like, 'I feel so stupid.' I'm like, 'Why are you making me sing like this? I feel like I sound so stupid.' And just that feeling of not knowing what I'm doing, but I'll do it anyway and see what happens, that feeling is usually a good indicator that we're on to something good.

Matt: Take me back to this decision, and if it's uncomfortable at all, we don't have to talk about it at all. But I guess I'm curious about this decision to come in and say, however it was delivered, I can't make another album like the one we just did. So if we're going to make another one, it's got to be some new evolution of things. That feels like a fearful moment on both sides. Like gosh, I'm going to drop this bomb, and it's going to take a lot for me to say this, and it also feels hard for me to receive. And I guess I just wonder, from your perspective, for both of you, how was that exchange?

Alisa: It was difficult for me to say it, because we'd been a band for a decade, and we'd done things a certain way for so many years. I remember being very upset but just feeling the need to have this conversation. And I knew it would lead to all sorts of tension and tears, but I don't know. Thom, what was your side of receiving this?

Thom: I think that just to kind of pull it back to the original question, or the original thing that we're all talking about here, the life you want to live, the life inside. I always wanted to be a musician. I'm not good at anything. I'm average at some things, and I consider myself like the jack of all trades, master of none. I don't know if you know that saying. I'm not exceptional at anything, so I don't think I've ever had real talent. I've just had determination.

I've been able to weather a few things. I've got perseverance. I think that's something I've got. But being able to actually become a successful musician, doing something that connected with people, I feel like an imposter. I feel like, wow. Wait until anyone finds out that I'm just a hack.

So for me, turning away from this or any threat of it disappearing, I've got nothing to fall back on. I don't believe that I could do anything else. I'm not sure if I'll ever do anything as successful. I don't have any reason to believe that I could do anything more successful. I feel like I have accidentally managed to do something successful, and I'm determined to hold onto it. I guess it seems obvious how that kind of thinking would make one behave or react to the idea of something going away. It felt very threatening. I'm determined to hold onto this.

And I feel like I go through this kind of thinking more now as I'm getting older, because I think it's just like maybe a maturity thing. You just wonder how long you can keep doing something for, and how long you can keep your dream alive. I think it's just part of the cynicism of age,

whether what you're doing is still appropriate, whether it is stifling you or holding you back or whatever, but then I swing back to, but this is your thing. This is what you've done. This is your legacy. Then I almost think that I am – you know that scene in Spinal Tap, when Nigel Tufnel's like, "Don't even look at it," when he's talking about the guitar? That's me and sort of the idea of letting go of the idea of Naked and Famous. "Don't even look at it." Such a weird analogy.

Matt: No, I get it. And it's interesting to hear you both talk about these really vulnerable, I guess when I think of your band, I'm thinking, maybe I should just ask. How many different continents have you played on together?

Alisa: Oh my god. So many.

Thom: Alisa and I are really bad, as well. People will say, "Where's your favorite place to play?" And we'll just draw blanks at say, "Where have we been, again?" We're so bad at remembering. All over Europe. All over America.

Alisa: We've done Europe, North America, South America –

Thom: Australia.

Alisa: We've done Asia. Australia and New Zealand. The only place—

Thom: South Africa.

Alisa: that we haven't visited is like Africa Africa.

Thom: We've been to South Africa.

Alisa: We've done South Africa.

Matt: So when you've played all over in both hemispheres and toured the globe, I guess I would think that you would acquire a sense of confidence that hey we know what we're doing, or at least we're confident enough that we could tap into things that we've tapped into before. But it all sounds very fragile when you talk about it. Why does it feel that way, do you think?

Thom: Why does it feel fragile? I don't know. Some days it isn't, and some days it is. Some days it's like easy to check the temperature by going on your Spotify page and seeing how many monthly listeners or followers you have. Sometimes it's very easy to sort of reassure yourself that, no no, this is real, this is here to stay. It's not going away. But then there are other weird moments that are easier to forget that at the time, when you're experiencing them, when you're going through them, like getting denied a press outlet or something. And you feel like oh god, it's all going away. No one cares. And then that is sort of the fragility of, I think, I think it taps into something really interesting about artists, which I feel like I've talked about before. But the idea of validation, looking and seeking validation. I really believe we are seeking and looking for validation. It's one of the things that keeps many artists going, and I think in a way that most of them aren't admitting. They're not being honest, and they're not being self aware about it. But I haven't read anything about psychology, so they're just totally ignorant of this idea of validation and how important it is and how much of a driving factor it is.

Alisa: Well if it wasn't for any of those little validations across our career, I don't know if we would still be wanting to be in this band. Maybe we would pivot and start other projects or something. But like –

Thom: Absolutely.

Alisa: -- very early on, when we released our first EP, we were signed to an indie label at the time. We released our first single, and it went straight to Number 1 on New Zealand alternative charts and college radio, and it was the first EP to receive a five star rating and be written about in the Sunday Herald, and they never reviewed EPs. They only reviewed albums. So just early on, 2006, we were like whoa. What is this? I guess we're onto something. Thom and I had only written not even a handful of songs at the time. So that kind of validation early on was like oh, this is the life that I've chosen to live, and this is so encouraging. We're going to keep going. We're going to keep writing. Let's just see what else happens. And you apply that mentality over and over again, and we're still here like 10 years later. It's kind of insane.

Matt: *Recover*, to me, as an album, but certainly as a song, feels like a new chapter. And then maybe, to start our conversation, it sounds like maybe not. I guess when I listen to it and I know what I know about the album, it just feels like maybe this is the new confident self. This is the album where you said, "We have to make one like this," and then you did. Does it feel like that new chapter, or do you feel like, nope, I'll probably throw down the gauntlet between now and the next album, too?

Thom: I feel like it's the new us and a step forwards.

Alisa: Yeah, me too.

Thom: It makes me think every time we do this as well, I go through this internal struggle each time we put out an album where, and again I feel like this ties back to the initial question, idea, statement, that you brought up, which is defining yourself and who you want to be in life, and I think when I was 18, 19 whatever, all I wanted to do was be a musician, and I imagined myself being like kind of like a solo musician. My idol was Trent Reznor, and Nine Inch Nails was like my favorite band, and I wanted to be like that. I wanted to be a singer, producer, whatever. And I was thinking about myself. It wasn't that I had any firm opinions about our collaborators or teammates or whatnot. But I had a goal and a reference point and that's it.

And then Alisa and I started making music, and it's not that I wasn't serious about it, but it didn't match or map this imagined picture in my head. And granted, I was 18 and this was like 2005, so I feel disadvantaged when I see today's kids and how much information they have and how much access they have. But that's a side note. I never imagined *The Naked And Famous* being the thing that defined me. And then it became the thing that defined me.

And then I sort of was like, oh wow. This is the real deal. It's not what I imagined, but it actually is what I imagined, it's just that I had a very self-centered or small view of what success might look like or what becoming a real artist was going to mean for me. And then as soon as it started to gain traction and snowball, I just pivoted, and I gave up on that idea of anything that resembled Nine Inch Nails or myself as a Trent Reznor-esque kind of character. And I was like, oh. Fuck that. This is perfect. I'm going to do this.

And then I think whilst we're doing *The Naked and Famous*, I have these moments where I go, oh I maybe should write a song just for me and do my own thing. And then *The Naked and*

Famous gets validated and all the artistic effort that goes into it gets validated, and I go, oh no no. Don't worry about that solo idea. Don't be so self-indulgent. This is the thing that you've been lucky enough to be successful with. Pour yourself into it. Don't waste time imagining this kind of other success. It's almost like I'm reacting against this selfish or childish impulse to – it just seems like rockstar imaginary childish fantasies. When I'm really living like a real working artist's life. So I kind of get irritated with myself for doing that. Putting this album out, it's given me that charge again, where I'm like oh. Why did I ever imagine that I might do anything separate? I've spent my entire life building and pouring myself into this. Knowing me, I'm just better to do one thing at a time. This is both the continuation and then another restart. So I hope you could follow me there. I'm rambling a bit. I'm very tired.

Alisa: That's not to say that you're not allowed to explore other roads, Thom. Because I know you have other interests, like a dream to score film and immerse yourself in that world. There are other things that you want to explore that don't fall under the umbrella of the Naked and Famous. Maybe The Naked and Famous would help you get there.

Thom: Yeah, but it might not. And that's the thing. I have nothing, I have nothing to lean on to imagine that I might get there. Do you know what I mean? I have nothing firm to grab onto to think, oh yeah, The Naked and Famous would give me some career in scoring. It's a delusion more than anything, because it's so unrelated to reality. I have nothing to prove it. No one else can prove it for me. The realest thing I have is the naked and famous. So I just think, well it would be foolish of me, so incredibly unwise, uncalculated, illogical, to not pour myself into this and then, to speak to your point Alisa about scoring, I think, well then The Naked and Famous should score something. I remove myself, because it's just –

Alisa: I don't know. I feel like this is just something you're working through. It's fine.

Matt: You know, I guess from an outside perspective, there is a flip side to say what you've described as your most successful are the things that are not logical: the songs that appear out of nothing and take no time at all to write and record, and that maybe, I don't know, maybe there's something to following something that's not so logical when it's presented itself. Yeah I don't even know what I'm saying. And I'm outside of it.

Thom: No, you're onto something, for sure. Yeah, I feel like so much of music is very illogical. It's not a good place for logic. Even though I'm saying all of this now, I think that's a really important part of it, that I struggle with, to be honest. Music and art is not a good place for logic. I get trapped in that sometimes in that way of trying to think.

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