

The Resistance Podcast // Episode 30 // Saunder Jurriaans

Matt: Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. Today I am excited and honored to have Saunder Jurriaans here with us today. Saunder, do you want to introduce yourself?

Saunder: Sure. I'm Saunder Jurriaans. I'm a composer for film, TV, and also a musician. I just put out a solo record. That's me.

Matt: Congratulations, by the way. It's a wonderful record.

Saunder: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Matt: Obviously, I want to talk about *Beasts* a little later on, as we get going, and more of your career, but just like all of our episodes, I'd love to get your response, where you're at right now or in whatever way it strikes you, to our source material.

If you're new to listening to the podcast, our source for The Resistance comes from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. And in it, he writes this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the unlive life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Saunder, I'd love to know, on your end, what does resistance look like for you at this point in your career, and what's your relationship to it.

Saunder: Yeah. It's such a huge subject for me that it's hard to figure out where to start. I love that quote. To me, that sounds like the idea of potentiality in all of us as artists. The resistance is that barrier between that potential, whether it's a barrier that we put up for ourselves often, or that it's an outside barrier, that can happen, or both, all of it. I struggle with that barrier on a daily basis. I'd even venture to say it might be that one of the biggest focuses of my life is how to manage that. Recently, the way we live right now in the era of COVID times, has kind of forced us all into a much more potentially introspective place. Or at least we kind of have to deal with ourselves a little bit more than usual. For me, that barrier comes from myself.

I guess my recent struggles are kind of interesting, because covid has been such a blessing and a curse, in many ways. On one hand, what I always kind of crave as an artist is this uninterrupted time, where you just have focus, and you don't have to think about family trips, holidays don't mean necessarily as much. There's just nothing coming up, unless I force some kind of min-vacation for me and my wife. But there's really nothing on the horizon but making music for me, or whatever else I'm working on in the moment. And it's great, and it has been great in a lot of ways.

But I'm seeing the other side of it, especially recently as this gets longer and longer. The less breakup of that time I have, the more chatter tends to surface in my psyche. I've been dealing with ways of interpreting that chatter, or dispelling it, or acknowledging it for what it is for many years. But I've noticed that it's harder now. It's more of a challenge. There's less things that are naturally taking me out of it. So yeah, I guess that's how I'd respond to the opening.

Matt: We referenced your first solo album earlier, and to me it comes at a very interesting period, looking from the outside, of your life where you were in a band for several years. You know that life well. And then you've also provided the score, with a writing partner you've scored over a hundred films and television shows. So there's this vast wealth of experience. And yet what I've read, the way you talk about your own new release, it sounds like a new artist making

his first foray. I just wondered, in what ways has your experience helped you face some of that resistance, and how much of it can you really not be saved from?

Saunders: Right. For me, putting out a solo record, it feels like – over many years of writing this stuff and ruminating over it, it was probably, I don't know. It was scary for me. It's a scary thing to do. There's something different about releasing music with a band. You have other people that are there to lift you up when you're down, or vice versa.

And then with scoring films, I have Danny, who's been my lifelong music partner, and we go into all of this together, and we're always supporting each other. And also with films, you put very little of yourself on the line as a film composer. I mean, you do, in terms of the music you make and the creative aspect of it, but once it comes to putting it out, and trying to get people to watch it or listen to it, it's out of your hands. It's a film. It's being marketed by the studio or the producers. The director usually is the one getting most of the credit. We just kind of sit back and enjoy that.

It's nice. It's nice not to be in the spotlight. I don't feel like I'm a person who's super comfortable with that part of myself. So releasing a solo album was a huge step for me. There were huge amounts of resistance along the entire journey, I guess.

Matt: Why do it, then?

Saunders: That's a great question. Well, because I love writing this music that I've put out. I love writing these songs. With film, which film has become my life in many ways, musically, and I love it, and I'm so grateful to be doing it and making a living with it, but there's definitely a, I like to equate it with illustration. You're drawing an illustration of a story for a story. Although your own style can be applied to it, you're still in service to the story.

So we are making music that's creative and it's wonderful to make, but it's always in service to a story, and we're always collaborating with a bigger team: director, editor. And it can be stifling sometimes, and frustrating. There's many times where I'll write a piece of music and it won't be received well by the director and won't go in the film, or they'll have a whole bunch of notes and I'll have to change it. It can be really frustrating.

We've gotten to a point where, well I don't know if you ever really get to this point, but in general, since the beginning, we've been very good at keeping our egos in check and being able to suffer through that kind of thing without it being a big deal for us. And I think that's what makes us successful as film composers, in a lot of ways. We are very collaborative, and we are very open to changing things and rewriting things. But as a creative person myself, and expressing what I really have to say musically, it's not fully satisfying for me. So for me, the other side of that was writing songs and pieces of music on my own, that I had nobody but myself to answer to, which could arguably be worse than a director sometimes.

But so these songs kind of came out. There are many more songs that didn't make it on this album, but I wrote many songs over the years, and they're always kind of a therapeutic kind of way of dealing with the rest of my career. Along the way, I always kind of opened them up and listened to them and worked on them some more, and I'd get excited sometimes and be like, I've got to put these out. I've got to do something. And then that period of excitement would wane, and my critical mind, my resistance, would grow stronger, and I'd put them back on the shelf. I went through many phases of that, until I'm not quite sure what it was that made me decide that they needed to really go out. It might be part of reaching a certain point in my

success as a film composer, that I cared less about what people might think of it, because I wasn't relying on it for my future or my income or things like that. That might have been part of it.

Maybe the body of work just kind of came together also, in a way, in a synergistic way, an organic way. I'm not sure, but it just happened a couple of years ago, and that's when I started the process of releasing it.

Matt: Yeah, you could have easily just written, and even recorded these, and sat on them as these therapeutic exercises, as you mentioned. Is there something that immediately comes to mind when I say, why put this out there? Is there something under there that is kind of wanting to come out?

Saunders: Yeah. I think that as a musician, or as an artist in general, we do need to experience feedback from an audience. For me, it was very much like, maybe part of the therapeutic idea of this music was to put it out. I would joke, when I was starting the process, with people. It wasn't a joke. It was real; it was a real feeling. But I would basically say, I would be happy if a hundred people listened to this record, that I don't know. And it was true. It just needed to be out of my hard drive, I guess, which I could equate to my mind, I guess. Hard drive, mind.

I don't know. There's a finality to releasing something and knowing that it's out in the world, and now it has its own life. It's almost like a birth of this thing that you created. For me, I find myself now that it's out, I'll check the Spotify plays, and I'll look at the views on YouTube, and I'll read the reviews and get excited, or not. But I'm not overly obsessed with it. I'm more interested in – first of all, I feel crazy gratitude to it even being out there and having the life that it has already. It's way beyond my expectations. I'm super happy and satisfied in that regard. But I'm not sure. I guess it's that idea that it's the beginning of its life outside my mind.

Matt: I'm thankful for your answer in some way, because I was going to ask about that, that when an album has come from, you know you said this was therapeutic. You've not made a secret that this album sort of came from a time of great brokenness or darkness. Does it feel like you're able to finally maybe put a cap on all of that, that you're finally able to move on with some closure by both documenting and then sort of letting it go?

Saunders: Yeah. For sure. That wasn't something that I was expecting as I was releasing it. I think one of the parts that made these songs very difficult for me to put out into the world was the fact that they're so personal. They brought up something for me that maybe I didn't want to constantly be reminded of. A time of my life that wasn't a comfortable time for me, and I want to put behind me, but in releasing the record, along with a lot of other stuff I kind of do in my own life, I found that it actually made me come to terms with a lot of that stuff.

I had come to terms with a lot of the stuff of the time over the past years anyway, but this was definitely a bigger reminder and a bigger – every time I would listen to those songs, and listen to a mix or something, I would be torn apart by dueling emotions of myself now and myself then. I was also a little worried about talking about it. I didn't want to talk about it. That's part of, you know when I went about releasing this, I was like, "I don't want to play it live. I don't want to talk about it. I just want it out there." But I found myself talking about it, and I found myself feeling okay with that. I think it's just part of the whole thing. It's a package.

Matt: I don't want to make you talk about it, but also it feels a little remiss, and we don't have to go there at all if you don't want, but it feels like we're talking around this vague thing that

happened. Can you define that to any degree that you're comfortable with, what was going on in that time?

Saunders: It was cumulative – it's hard because there were so many different things happening. In the end, it was a period of years that I suffered very severe depression, anxiety. I think part of it was, it was right in the beginning of when I started scoring films, and the band had dissolved. I kind of realized that my life was taking this new turn, and I wasn't quite sure if that's what I wanted to go, as an artist. My life had shifted drastically. I went from touring half the year to being in a studio in New York. It was very different, even though it was still music.

At the same time, I was still working multiple jobs and trying to make ends meet. I was confused. I had had a history of depression already in my life. I was using alcohol and drugs in a very excessive way to manage that. It was to the point where I had to ask for help and kind of get myself out of that place. Those years actually, when I started that process of trying to quit that behavior, was when things got most difficult for me, and the depression became much deeper, and I was very lost.

Throughout it, I was still working and writing music and stuff, but I was really in a bad, awful place. My wife and I have been together for nineteen years now, eighteen years, and it really affected our relationship. We were very close to splitting up at that time. We didn't – we got our own help, and I made it through this much stronger.

Most of the songs were actually, because during that time, it's not that I stopped writing, but I don't know how productive I was. The really kind of inspired period came in the years kind of coming out of that period, I guess, and realizing that I had these kind of multiple sides to myself, and kind of being okay with those sides and accepting these darker elements of myself instead of fighting them. Does that kind of make sense to what you're asking?

Matt: Of course it does. I was going to ask this, and you maybe already answered it for me, but I just want to make sure. You mentioned, "I'm not really sure how productive I was during those years." And I was going to ask, what role did creativity play for you during that time? Do you recall? Are any of these songs rooted in that time, or are they all sort of snapshots afterward?

Saunders: It's hard to say. It's hard to, honestly, to remember, because a lot of the songs might have just started with guitar noodling, and they didn't get recorded right away. The documented versions I have of them are a little bit, well I guess some of them are right smack in the middle of this. Yeah, I think that some of them are directly out of that time. I just know myself, in terms of writing and depression, which I've dealt so much with. I just don't write when I'm depressed. I'm not that kind of artist who, maybe the quintessential, "Oh god, I'm hurting so bad, I'm going to write a song about it." It just doesn't work for me that way. I have to be on the upswing. And I can use the memories of those times, however far away they are, to inspire music, but I definitely don't write when I'm in the thick of it. That's why it's such a dangerous place for me, I guess.

Matt: I want to switch gears. You have this new solo release, but it comes on, I just love these different chapters. It makes me very interested in the way that they play together or not, in terms of, you had this expression with other people, as a band. Like you said, "We toured together half the year. I was gone from home." That's a lot of fighting in that direction for the sake of that expression. Then there's this visual, setting your music to visuals, and you were talking then, like "Hey it's kind of nice to not have to, like I can kind of wash my hands of things at a certain point and not have to bear the weight of some of the metrics of commerce," etc.

I guess I wonder, in all of that, has there been some, I guess it makes me curious about your expectations for something like this. Do you wish that maybe this had happened much earlier? Are you glad to, I mean of course you've said several times that you're grateful for the work that you have and what you're able to do. I don't want to take away from that. But I also wonder if some of the success you wish had happened, and other things that you had fought for earlier, and just how all this works together.

Saunders: I'm kind of of the philosophy that it's happened now, and that's the only way it could have happened. I'm kind of losing my train of thought. Was your question....I got kind of lost.

Matt: I kind of asked a convoluted question. Let me ask it this way. You've had such tremendous success with scoring these films and TV shows, etc. And you've had the band life and now this. I guess I just wonder whether you've, like the success that you had or wished that you had with the band, and now what you had there. How does that mess with your expectations for what you're doing now? Do you wish that some of that could have happened for the band, or for your own solo stuff earlier? I guess, when you're busy with assignments versus maybe what you want to be doing.

Saunders: Yeah, obviously it's all been a road to lead to this place, I think. I don't know if I would have released this album if it hadn't been for, obviously, the experiences I've had in the past ten years of my life, scoring films and stuff. Actually, just sonically, the way the album came together was very much inspired by film scoring. I'm excited about this solo. I'm not just releasing one album.

I'm going to go on and keep doing this. I have plenty of songs in the works. I want it to become a part of my career, rather than something separate. I think, in terms of, man it's so hard to say if I wish the band had somehow been super successful, maybe I would never have scored a film, and maybe I would never have gone into this career, which has been so satisfying in so many ways. I think that I'm very happy with the way things have gone and led to this place. I think it's a great place to end up.

Matt: It is not hard to picture even some sort of visual elements when listening to the record, so this feels very much, from the outside, that you couldn't have made this record without your body of work, in terms of scoring. Is that true, and even as you're making it, if it is true, do you have some sort of visuals in mind while you're putting this together?

Saunders: I don't really. Nothing concrete. Mostly for me what was important about *Beasts* was the arc of the record, I think. I grew up listening to Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, and a lot of heavy metal, a lot of concept albums. I really believe in that idea that an album is an experience and a story. My experience with film, I think, just made that stronger in what I wanted.

So I was very conscious, when I was sequencing the record, of making this, kind of this journey. It's more of an abstract. It's not a concept. It's an abstract arc that I find satisfying, I guess. But yeah, I mean the work in film, it's interesting. If I listen to these songs, I can point out different periods, or different films, even, specific films that inform specific songs. I would also go back in, over the years, and add different textures that I found during a film recording or a film scoring project, and add those to some of the songs. But yeah, I think both conceptually and sonically that it's informed a lot of this record, for sure.

Matt: A couple quick questions for you. Of all of your experiences in scoring, which project has, to date, proved most challenging, and which are you most proud of?

Saunder: That's a hard one. Well, god. I think there's two films that I'm most proud of. One of them is an older one called *Enemy*. Another one is *LA 92*. They were both, I'm not sure what, I feel like they're both, the music is really directly what Danny and I want to make, I think. There's an epicness to it, a size to it, that's satisfying, and then there's also a kind of an artistic edge to it and originality that we really value.

And then the hardest projects. God, there's been so many. I don't know, they all have their challenges. It's very rare that we get a project that I'm like, "Oh that was pretty easy." Recently we worked on *The Devil All the Time*, which was Antonio Campos' newest film, and we're really happy with the way it came out. But it was a struggle, working with Antonio is very satisfying, because he doesn't use temp in his edit, so we kind of work with him to find where all the score goes, and the language of the score starts from a very rough edit, even an assembly.

But throughout the process, it went on for a really long time. There were a lot of different directions we explored. There were some moments we wanted to go in a certain direction, and he wanted to go in a different direction.

That's classic in our job. We just have to learn to deal with that stuff and still remain, first of all, professional, and then also with enough integrity that we are still, we're not just giving in to doing what somebody else is wanting us to do, but we're also making sure that it is original and is our voice coming out. That's always a challenge.

I think the biggest overall challenge of scoring films is learning that dialogue with the team, with the director, with whoever is the most vocal in the music. Not becoming overwhelmed by it, but also giving it its breath.

Matt: And not giving in so much that you lose yourself.

Saunder: Exactly. Yeah.

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