

THE RESISTANCE - EPISODE 36

Josh Radnor - Interview Transcript

Matt: Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. Today I'm thrilled to sit down with actor, director, writer, songwriter, Josh Radnor. Why don't you introduce yourself and how you normally, how do you say what you do?

Josh: Oh I just say actor, writer, director, songwriter, no I don't. You know what, you've hit on something that I have difficulty with, which is saying what I do. The easiest thing for me to say I do is that I'm an actor, in that I went to grad school for acting at NYU, I've been a professional actor for over 20 years. Most people know me as an actor. But I've also written and directed two films, I've directed music videos, I've written plays and prose and now I'm a songwriter and I put out albums of original music. So I guess, and I try to avoid any sort of pretentious-sounding labels, but I think I'm a storyteller, and I just tell stories in whatever form suits the story I want to tell. Sometimes it's a 90-minute movie, and sometimes it's a three-minute song.

Matt: I love it. I love it. All within the arts in many ways. I want to get to so many things; however, we begin each of our episodes with this quote from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. You mentioned earlier, you've actually read this book before, and other Pressfield materials. Pressfield writes this. He says, "Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlive life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Having juggled all of these different bowling pins, I don't know why I chose that analogy, by the way, but doing all the things that you've done, and so much creation involved in your career here, what does that quote look like for you, at this stage of your career?

Josh: Yeah, you know, I got a lot out of *The War of Art*, and whatever his follow-up book was. But I also wrestled with some of its tone and terminology. I think that I know resistance. Certainly I know resistance. I recognize it. I've had to stare it down and wrestle with it. But I also, he's outlining the creative path in a fairly, I use this term kind of loosely, but a kind of masculine way. I'm reading this Ursula Le Guin essay about hunters and gatherers and how we think of storytelling, the hero's adventure, as we only tell the story of the hunter, but most of the world has been supported by the gatherers. The gatherers are really holding things down, but the story is somehow less dramatic or gripping to us. And I feel like the way Steven Pressfield articulates creativity, it's very much like you're stalking a prey.

Matt: Yes. Yes.

Josh: And you have to kill it. And on some level, I can get behind that. It depends on my mood of the day. But then there's other ways to think of creativity. And I will directly answer your question about that particular thing, but I wanted to say that when I read Liz Gilbert's, what's her book on creativity? Do you know that Elizabeth Gilbert book?

Matt: No, I don't.

Josh: Oh, okay. Well she has a terrific book on creativity. It will come to me. It's probably on my bookshelf. I could probably just scan and find it. But she has a terrific book on creativity, which is much more of a loving pep talk from a fellow creative friend. It's not saying, you have to strangle your resistance and watch it die in your hands until you choke the life out of it, and then you ground the novel to the pulp. She's more like, find your passion, find your curiosity, love what you do. I'm much more inclined to try to create from a joyful place, rather than an angry place.

Also, a book that not a lot of people know, that I give to everyone, is called *The Great Work of Your Life* by Stephen Cope. It's a book about dharma, essentially, the Indian concept of one's sacred duty. And he looks at the *Baghavad Gita*, Krishna talking to Arjuna on the battlefield, as a metaphor or a kind of road map for living one's creative, sacred life. And he looks at all these

different people: Mahatma Gandhi, and who else? Harriet Tubman, Beethoven, all these different people who were clearly in the pocket of their life, doing what they were put on earth to do. So I find those two books to be endlessly inspiring, but I also, I recommend Steven Pressfield's book. It's certainly a kick in the pants, but it's a little more of a drill sergeant doing it than a dear friend in the corner at a party.

That said, two lives, you know I have felt the chasm between the life I'm living and the life I suspect I should be living. Sometimes that can be motivating and wonderful fuel, and sometimes it can be just another way to beat ourselves up. I'm trying in my life to avoid self-punishment and flogging myself for how much I create, how much I don't create. I had a therapist who specialized in highly creative personalities years ago. He said one of the features of highly creative personalities is starting more things than you can finish. And I was worried, because I was starting all these projects and not finishing them. He said, "Start more projects." He said, "The projects that have some heat to them and need to be finished will get completed. But you almost have to have this fertile environment where you're throwing a lot against the wall." And I've always taken that. I have so many half-finished things in my computer, and I get back to a lot of them. Sometimes I needed 6 years to think about it, and then suddenly I figure it out. My brain is doing some dot-connecting and work while I'm living my life and doing other things.

I have felt that there's this better, more creative person, there's a deeper finisher. There's a closer in me that if not for the phone and the news and procrastination and social media, I could have created more. But then I look, and I've created quite a bit. And I'm trying to avoid, like I said, just punishing myself. So I both stand behind what Pressfield says, and I also have to amend it for myself out of some sort of compassion for myself.

Matt: Which is often hard to find, right? It feels like we can so quickly go to that negative self talk and buy into that more so than maybe giving ourselves some of that grace and compassion.

Josh: I think so, and I think being an artist in free market capitalist America presents a whole host of challenges and opportunities to pile on yourself and be quite cruel to yourself. I do think, my friend Greg is a wonderful novelist, and he said, "All the really great artists I know live with massive amounts of self doubt and suspect that they might be a fraud." And he said, "The thing is, I let that fear of my own fraudulence push me to disprove it to myself, to be great." And he said, "The artists that I know that are pretty self-satisfied and think they're fantastic are generally, I don't like their art."

So you almost have to reconcile yourself with living in a state of near-perpetual dissatisfaction. But if you can stay just south of insane and stay in the pocket of working on stuff and revising stuff and opening yourself up to feedback and all that good stuff, you can make something wonderful. I think there's no great artist that is exempt from those feelings of self-doubt and fraudulence.

Matt: I want to leverage that into where you're at today. Because you first picked up the guitar just a handful of years ago, right?

Josh: Yeah, it would have been February 2017 is when I started playing the guitar in earnest. I mean, I knew a couple chord shapes, but I couldn't pick. I didn't really know how to play guitar. But I played violin when I was a little kid, so I think some of the left hand stuff came a little easier to me, but I really did have to learn, and I picked it up quite quickly.

Matt: When you stepped out with Ben Lee and start writing songs, and then music opens itself up as this other creative outlet that you could pursue, not just on a hobby level, but I'm releasing things under my name, and this is part of what I do, how much of that, I read an interview where you said perfectionism has been sort of the ever-present demon for you throughout. But when

you're starting something new like that, that feels like a big victory to even step out in that way. Did it feel like that for you? Or how was facing that down in a new medium?

Josh: Yeah. I'm always some sort of curious mix of bravado and daring and also deep, deep, deep 3AM fear and imposter syndrome. For some reason the courage part of me is just ever-so-slightly more pronounced than the fear part of me. That doesn't mean I don't entertain the fear and listen to it and let it freak me out. I do. But I find, well first of all, starting with Ben, who has been putting out records since he was 12 or 13, and we were really good friends when we started writing songs, for years. And then we just found we had this great songwriting vibe together. And I got years of a songwriting workshop, basically, with this really talented songwriter. And he let me see that I had some real native talent as a songwriter.

I knew that I had some lyric writing ability. I've always loved rhyme and rhythm. And I have a lot of words and ideas. But I didn't know that I had so many melodies kicking around in me. And he was incredibly supportive of my musical, my nascent dawning musical abilities. And he would often defer to me, even in musical matters. Especially on the first record, he really let me set the tone of the content. But he was the one who was figuring out the music. We wrote the music together in that I would sing along to what he was playing, and a lot of melodies came from me. The second record, when I was playing guitar, Ben got much more into, it was much more of a tug-of-war in the greatest sense, of like we were both wrestling with the songs and trying to figure them out. But I ended up doing two albums with Ben, and I felt in a lot of ways that he provided me with some sort of cover against, I don't know that I would have had the courage to just step out with a guitar and say hey, I'm now writing songs and these are my songs.

What happened was I had a really, really hard breakup, and I wrote a song in despair one night. This song poured out of me called Foolish Gold. I played it for Ben, and it was pretty crudely, it was kind of an interesting song, I like it still, but I was strumming kind of like flamenco. I didn't know what I was doing with my right hand. Ben really liked it, and a couple other people liked it, and I started playing it at Radnor and Lee shows. And people were really affected by it. And then every show we did, I started playing a song, and Ben would play a song just on our own, we would each take one on our own. So I was able to creep ever so slightly out into me and a guitar on stage singing an original song. And the other times, I was just with Ben. We were touring, we were doing all that. And I was picking up the guitar and holding down rhythm when he was doing more interesting stuff.

I had no business playing professionally in front of people at the rate that I did, and how quickly I got up there and started doing it. But I've turned all my hobbies into career. That's something I've just done. When I watch someone do something amazing, and I'm inspired, I don't think, wow I want to see them do that again all the time. I want to be like, I want to watch them do that again so I can figure out how to do it. I really like to try the stuff and see if I can do it.

Now I wouldn't take everything out for a spin. You're not going to see me be a professional dancer any time soon. There are some things that I just know are not my lane. But the music thing just opened up for me, and songs started pouring out of me, and I would play them for people, and people were really moved by them, and really related to them. I started to feel like I am at an age where I am less interested in saying other people's words. Life has knocked me around enough that I actually have something to say, and I'm still here, and I've been up, I've been down, I've been all around. It's just, songwriting is proving to be a really wonderful palette for me to just express things.

Matt: What was the initial impulse there to even make music with Ben in the first place?

Josh: It was years of me and Ben saying, we need to write a song together. And then not doing it. And then for whatever reason, it was, "All right let's get together this Tuesday," however long it was, 7 years ago, "and let's write a song." And we wrote a song called Wider Spaces, which is on the first record. It's inspired by this Herman Hesse poem that I've always loved. We got

together the next week, and we wrote a song called Be Like the Being, which I think is the first song on the first record. And then by the third week, when another song poured out of us, Ben said, "We should make a record." He told me that he's been paired together for a lot of co-writes over the years. Sometimes it's just deadly. You're just staring at each other for four hours and nothing's happening. Sometimes you find people that you have a co-writing groove with, and he said, "We just have it. We have the chemistry. Our voices sound really well together. Every time we get together, we write songs." And essentially, he would come over, we'd get caffeinated, we'd talk about our day, or our lives, what's going on with us, and out of that conversation, some sort of nugget or seed of an idea would emerge, and we would write to that.

So it was really, the songs were borne out of our friendship, and then once we started doing it, and started playing for people, I was just like, oh this is the most fun creatively that I've had in a really long time. And I just wanted to keep doing it.

Matt: So you had never written a song before, but somehow within your friendship you felt like, we should try writing a song together?

Josh: Well, when I looked back at my life, you see these little moments. In the fourth or fifth grade, my friend Jeremy and I, he was just like my best friend in the fourth or fifth grade, we wrote a bunch of songs together, and we sang them for our moms or something. So I remember very distinctly doing this little Simon and Garfunkel act for our moms. And then I was at the Guthrie Theater, in between my second and third year at NYU. I think this was '98, maybe? Summer of '98. And there was a guy in the troupe with me who was quite a good guitar player and songwriter. We wrote about seven songs together that summer, but I wrote all the lyrics and he wrote all the music. So I didn't try my hand at anything musical, but I did write these lyrics for him and for us, and I remember being proud of them, and I remember really loving collaborating on songs together.

So there were, if you look back, there were these kind of breadcrumbs leading up to this. So it didn't come entirely out of the blue, but largely speaking it did. My idea was, part of the imposter syndrome came from the idea that to be a professional musician you had to start at 7 or 8 or 12 and have the band in your parents' garage and do all that. I just thought if you hadn't done it by the time you were 40, forget it. But I just took it on, and I've disproved that to myself. Now there is still a world that I need to learn on the guitar, or could learn on the guitar. The merciful thing is, if you learn two or three chords pretty well on the guitar, you can write thousands of songs. Your newcomerness, your beginneriness, is not necessarily an impediment to you writing great songs right out of the gate. And that's something that I just loved about the guitar right away.

Matt: Was there a safety or was there almost the resistance there, when you're shifting from one medium to another? Is there a safety in going, hey if this doesn't work, I have all these other outlets I can lean on so I'm not dependent on this. But at the same time is that also sort of a, well if I'm known for these other things, how can I try to say I'm also that?

Josh: I think it was more the latter, because I never like to think in terms of fallback. I now just think of it as, I'm doing all these things. I'm doing all these things, and when I'm working on one, that's what I'm working on, and then I'll turn my attention to the other thing. I think it's more like there's always an embarrassment of asking people to kind of pivot with you or move with you into some other thing.

I also think people are really confused when you do something, when you're known very publicly for doing something else, and you then are doing this other thing. I'm on a TV show right now called Hunters that we're about to start our second season, which is great fun. I love doing it. It's a wild show on Amazon. But you know if I post too much about music on my Instagram, people say, "Why did you stop acting?" I never stopped acting. I've been acting constantly since How I Met Your Mother ended. I'm just doing these other things, too. And I think people get confused at a creative life that has more offshoots to it. So I try not to let that bother me that much.

One thing I do wrestle with is that I was on this incredibly popular, kind of global hit show, and so a lot of people know me from that. And yet what I'm drawn to and what I make is much more kind of indie stuff, including my movies, which were both at Sundance, and released independently. My music is obviously not with a major label. So I've had these experiences of working with multi-national corporations as an actor. And then as a writer/director/playwright/songwriter, I have these much more organic, indie experiences, all of which I love. That's not to say, I would love for a huge label to swoop in and make my songs play on every radio station. I wouldn't turn that down, I mean with caveats. I don't want someone to change what I'm doing. But at the same time, I think being on *How I Met Your Mother* for so long, I had a kind of success that I felt like, okay. That happened. But now what do I really want to make? And I tried to use the freedom that I was given by deciding to just be an artist and be a creative person. And it's working out pretty nicely. I can still get in my head about oh, do I need to be in another hit TV show? I don't want to be the guy, like whatever happened to so-and-so. I'm not making music because I can't get acting work. I'm still getting acting work. I'm just trying to follow what I love and go where it's warm.

Matt: Let me ask that further. Is that 100% compass of just following the energy, where it's at, or is there a percentage of that that is, because I guess I'll ask it this way. I'm glad you brought that up about *How I Met Your Mother* and the success there, and how that can define someone in the same way that maybe a first album can define a band. And then after that, the band will purposefully react against their previous work, in order to showcase a breadth or scope that they're wanting other people to appreciate. They want that appreciated as well. And you just said, I'm making music, not to kick against something. I'm genuinely interested in these other things. So I guess I wonder, is that a hundred percent interest in these things, or is there sort of a both-and, where there's also a part of you trying to kick against in the same way?

Josh: I think I would have to have more access to my subconscious to answer that fully. I've always been of the opinion, like I'm not, as an actor, I pass on more things than I accept, only because I'm not the kind of actor that is interested in elevating C- material. Al Pacino's on *Hunters* with us, and he told me this thing one time, that he said, for a number of years, he was really interested in taking scripts that were not quite good and seeing if he could make them good. I was like, wow. That is not interesting to me. Hats off to him. I think that's a really great, fun project if that's what you're into. But I have to believe in the material, especially as an actor, if I'm going to do it. So I just wanted stuff that made me feel alive. Making my own stuff, as hard as it can be, there's just a kick to it, because you feel, you know as an actor, I'm playing in an orchestra. Someone else is conducting, and someone else wrote the script. But I think I enjoy being the conductor. I enjoy being the composer, as well. I just had to let myself follow that.

I'm really of the opinion, especially as an actor, if I just keep doing good material, and doing my best at it, some of it's going to hit. Some of it's not going to hit. I've done three television series since *How I Met Your Mother*. I've loved them all. I've thought I've been quite good on all of them. They've had varying degrees of success and runs. But at the same time, I don't consider *How I Met Your Mother* to be more of an artistic triumph because it ran for 9 years than I do *Mercy Street*, the *Civil War* show I did for PBS, or *Rise*, this show I did for NBC. I try not to judge what I'm doing by the popular reception of it, because I don't think that's a wise metric. I think that stuff is out of my hands. As Krishna says to Arjuna on the battlefield, you do the work and the fruits of the labor are out of your hands. They don't belong to you.

Matt: Is that easier for you to separate yourself from at this point in your career than it was, say, 5, 10 years ago?

Josh: I think so. I still can get caught up in, would someone just give me an award already? The kind of ego steps in and says, you've got to be relevant. You've got to get a hit. You've got to keep going. And that's just a consequence of being in showbusiness, right? But at the same time, if I can really calm myself down and know that writing a song one day is as good as it gets,

and the making of stuff and the sharing of stuff. I don't like promoting stuff. It embarrasses me to have to be self-promotional all the time. But I've enjoyed unrolling this record. I've enjoyed the slow, single every week or two, hearing feedback from people. Honestly, surprising people.

There's a lot of actors that are musicians and want to be musicians. I think it's sometimes laughed at or not really respected. I'm just trying to do it in a way that feels in line with my integrity and of a peace with the rest of my career, even though it's a bit of a curve ball. If you watch and absorb my movies and then listen to my music, I think you can recognize a common voice in it. And the Museletters too, just a thoughtful, searching, sincere, but hopefully not self-serious voice that's trying to figure out how to be the best version of myself and live with some grace and dignity.

Matt: You mentioned the making and sharing. I loved the way that you just said that. The making and sharing of something. And it occurred to me when you said that, that maybe music would allow for sharing at maybe a more optimum level than acting, directing, or being in theatre. Maybe because it's so instant, or maybe not. I guess I just wonder how you have found the musical side of that formula sort of hitting you.

Josh: Well, I would have to say my greatest love is music in terms of the art form that I feel like is the most instantaneously affects and alters me, is music. If given the choice of what I want to consume, I would almost always choose music over a TV show or a movie, even though I have great love for those things. There's something about music. A three-minute song can absolutely alter you, cellularly. I find it's so mysterious. I've heard it said that music is the only non-representational art form. Every other art form: art, sculpture, dance, theatre, like they're all riffing off the material world. And music is like, where does it even come from? It's like fire. It's a mysterious element that seems to emerge from some transcendent space. So because of that, I think music is almost like at its essence a very spiritual thing. And most spiritual communities have some sort of musical component to them, right? So if I have to throw my lot in with anything as a fan, it would be music. Going to a Cloud Cult show, which we talked about our shared favorite band. That's a spiritual experience. That feels like, I'm like this is what a religious service should feel like. I feel like they're just asking the most, Craig Minowa is like, howling into the universe, asking the biggest questions you could possibly ask. I just find it really thrilling. Learning that I could do that myself was just this watershed moment for me. I was like, I'm still going to listen to Cloud Cult, but I'm also going to try to make my own stuff, and then hopefully send it to Craig and see what he thinks.

Matt: One more for you. Stepping out into music, then stepping out from under a banner where you shared the marquee with Ben Lee. How vulnerable does that feel?

Josh: Pretty vulnerable. Yeah. I did a show, a livestream at Hotel Café last Thursday night, before the EP came out. The sound guy was named Kevin, and he was mixing me that night, and he said, "Yeah I mixed you in some of your early appearances here." He said, "You've gotten a lot better." And that's always a strange thing to hear, because you're like, how bad was I when I was up here earlier? Now, what he's saying is great, because of course I want to be improving. I want to feel that I've got this more. But at the same time, I think that I was up on that stage, slightly maybe a little earlier than – everyone was so supportive, and friends would invite me to play on those musical evenings, and I fell in with the songwriting community out in LA, and it's been really nourishing. And yet, there is a part of me, that courageous part of me, that throws myself up there, maybe before I'm fully cooked.

But I like learning on the job. I learned how to be a film director by directing films, not by going to film school. And the first three days of directing my first film, Happythankyoumoreplease, I was under water. I did not know what I was doing, what the terms were. I had some sense of how to tell the story, but it wasn't until the fourth day that I was like oh, I get this. There's something about really plunging yourself into the deep end, and then learning how to swim, because otherwise you will drown. I'm okay learning that way. That doesn't mean I'm not terrified. But I

feel that it's the right moment for me. I've gotten enough feedback on my songs. I started a YouTube channel at the start of quarantine or a little before. I've posted a lot of original songs. I've gotten enough feedback that I'm onto something, and people are affected by this stuff, to give me some wind at my sails to keep going. And that's all I need is just a little nudge or a wink from people, like we get it, we see you, we hear this, more please.

So yeah, it was terrifying, but it was also time to do that. Ben's back in Australia. We never got to tour our second record, Golden State, which I'm really proud of that collection of songs, so hopefully we can hit the road with those. But I do consider myself a musician now, at long last. So I'm excited to also just be up there with a guitar and share these songs.