

## THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 32

### Mat Kearney interview – Episode Transcript

**Matt Conner:** Hello and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, which sounds eerily like Mat Kearney, my guest for today. How are you, Matt?

**Mat Kearney:** I'm good. They do sound the same.

**Matt:** We were just discussing, beforehand, the similarities there. I'm not sure if there are other similarities, but I hope that you're never mistaken for me. I, on the other hand, try my best to get mistaken for you all the time.

**Mat:** Well, I'm sorry? I don't know. That's not a good thing. I know, I kept listening to your interviews, and I kept hearing, "This is Matt Conner." I'm like, wait. Is that me? That sounded like me. There's a Matt something with a glottal stop beginning. We're very similar.

**Matt:** I don't know that I've ever heard that term, but I like it a lot.

**Mat:** Yeah, it's the only one I've got.

**Matt:** Well, Mat, I'd love to start where we start all of our interviews. And you've already said you're very familiar with the book, *The War of Art*, by Steven Pressfield. Do you remember the first time you came across that work?

**Mat:** I do. I had just moved to Nashville, and I was pursuing music, and I just remember that quote of, like, the difference between professional writers and amateur writers is a professional writer writes every day. I just was very gripped by that quote. You've just got to do it. You've got to find a way to do your thing every day. It really stuck with me.

**Matt:** It really kind of de-mystifies the whole process, for me at least, in terms of writing or creating of any kind, which is really important, I think, for growth. Well Pressfield opens his book with this quote, so this is where we start each episode and where I'd love to start with you. Pressfield 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." You said you've read that book multiple times earlier as we were talking. What does that resistance look like for you this far into your career?

**Mat:** Yeah, it's changed over the years, the resistance. There's always a different one, a different face of that. I feel like for me these days, resistance has looked like kind of returning almost to the beginning of just this kind of like passion, unedited, childlike drive and passion in what I do and in my creation. Kind of silencing this audience that maybe I've built a life with, the history of what I've done, the known successes of certain moves in my career, and kind of turning back to that like, do I love this, is this something I love. And that's not always easy to decipher at times. That's been the journey of this new record I've been working on.

It's been incredibly life-giving to kind of challenge that thing of like do I love this? That's it. That's the guiding force. Do I love this? Do I want to play it for my homies in their car? Those are the two rules of this record. My brother. I used to make records just for my brother to like. I'm like, would Patrick like this? And that has been kind of the north star of this project. It's been, oddly, some of the best stuff I feel like I've done in a really long time.

**Matt:** I want to dive further into that, but I want to contrast it. Take me to other albums in between. What were some of the other questions you were asking?

**Mat:** Well, I mean, my first record, the biggest, *Nothing Left to Lose* was my big record. Commercially, the most successful, probably. The resistance was more about primal things like, hey, do we have a

recording studio? Do we have money to record this? But as far as creatively, it was just like, that's all I did. It's all I wanted to do. All I lived for was writing songs. The resistance of that record was external, not internal. And then it did really well, out of nowhere. Nobody expected it. We took out a loan, and at the time, we had 15, 20 grand to make this record, which was a huge amount of money to us at the time. We made this album, and I just wrote whatever I wanted. Whatever I thought was cool, whatever I thought was interesting. Sixteen bar verses, which is ridiculously long. Just didn't care, man. Was just like, hey. I'm doing what I want. And then fast forward, it's a gold record, whatever, it explodes.

The reality of the second record. The sophomore thing is so real. Then the challenge is like, what voices are you allowing to shape? So then in my *City of Black and White* record, I look back at that season and I love that record, still, but I feel like I maybe gave, I was worried about doing the wrong thing at times. I heard Harry Styles say that on NPR the other day, and I really resonated with it. He's worried about doing the wrong thing, as opposed to just doing something, what you love. And that would be my critique of that album, is there's a lot of certain decisions I made that were not productive or fruitful.

And then the next record was this Young Love record that had this song called Ships in the Night, and these other ones that did really well. And I actually was like, screw it. We're just going for it. I'm going to do this stuff. I don't even know if this is cool or not. I'm just doing what I want. And then that one did well. It's crazy how that always works for me. And then the next record, I tried to recreate it, maybe, on some levels, and had my unsuccessful moment. And then the next record, I just did my own thing, and that was probably successful. So generally, if I don't care about anything but what I love, it tends to be even more successful. But it's just hard to get yourself to do that at times.

**Matt: Yeah. Hey, can you drill down just a bit for me on that? Like when you point to *City of Black and White*, for example. And you say, "I was listening to that, and I feel like I was making some decisions based on not doing the wrong thing." Is there a specific that you can point to and say, "This is how that was working out in my creativity"?**

**Mat:** I have to preface, because I'm, I don't know why. I really still love that record. I maybe see that in my decision-making. I don't know if the result, like some people, that's their favorite record I've made. So it's hard to have someone's experience reflect that, but there was a freedom that was missing for my experience. Like I remember my first record, I was learning how to do music. I couldn't sing that well, early on in my writing process. So I would do a lot of spoken word. I was influenced a lot by hip hop music, but I would have a guitar and kind of just like almost rap these verses and then sing a little simple chorus, but just to like a guitar. That would be what I did most of the day. That, really, people were like, whoa, that's weird.

But then I remember, after *Nothing Left to Lose*, there was, I'll never forget, this Rolling Stone interview, or a review of that record, and they were just bashing that side of my music. They were like, you can't do this. Like a white guy can't. When I came up, like the context of, to have any sort of urban influences, you had to be from that world. That's kind of died. Now anyone can do anything they want. You can borrow from anywhere. You can put on a cowboy hat if you want. You don't have to be from Mississippi or Alabama. But that was that kind of genre thing had been so ingrained in the critic and that 80s mentality of like, Rock section, Rap section, and you had to like be from a specific neighborhood to do that kind of music. Kid from Eugene, Oregon, who was a skater, who grew up on A Tribe Called Quest, just wanted to use some of those influences, was not accepted. I think I listened to that.

I was also really involved. I had moved to Nashville, and I was really into singer-songwriter records, like Neil Young and Emmylou Harris. So there was a natural thing in my heart where I was not really into kind of the beats. I was more into the Bob Dylan side of my influence than A Tribe Called Quest. But I think I maybe got scared of that side of what made me really good because of pushback. Maybe didn't realize that one of the more successful and beautiful things of what I did was this kind of form of art that

pushed people to make a decision to hate it or like it. The longer I've done this, the more I've realized that is an important thing to do, at times.

And it's, for me, weirdly one of the most challenging things to do. I love people liking me. If I'm being totally honest, if I'm just being totally vulnerable, I like that people like something. It's painful for me for someone not to like, that review was painful for me to read. But weirdly when I pursue those things that cause people to make decisions, I'm like, I don't care if this half of the room doesn't like it. I know this half of the room will freak out over it. That seems to be the most successful art I do. And I see that in other artists, too. That's a very valuable thing, to make people decide.

**Matt: I love that. I'm drawn to that. It makes me curious about this pandemic year. Earlier, we were talking and you said you've largely been home and planned on being home this year, and then you had a newborn. You have a three-year-old, too, is that right?**

**Mat:** That is correct.

**Matt: When you lack the chance to be out and about, receiving some of that validation on the road, does that mess with your head, being at home?**

**Mat:** No, I don't really, like live is something that I've grown, I think I've gotten good at putting on shows. I love it. I just finished an acoustic tour. Some of those are some of the most rewarding things I do. But no, I am at my core a songwriter, creator, producer, like that's the stuff that gets me going in the morning. Shows are awesome. I love them. But, man, I've played a couple thousand shows at this point in my life. I don't come from the John Mayer, Corey Henry, jazz, where like the expression of their instrument is what gets them going. I'm more like, when I write a song that just is like rip-your-heart-out good, that is my drug of choice. When I'm sitting in my living room and I know I've found that thing, you're like, whoa. This is good. That is my, if I had to choose one side of what I do, that would be the one that really gets me going.

**Matt: The last song that made you feel that way.**

**Mat:** That I wrote?

**Matt: Yes.**

**Mat:** Or just someone else?

**Matt: No. You.**

**Mat:** See I've been in producer mode for so long that I haven't written. I kind of put down the pen for a minute when I'm trying to finish an album, because it just convolutes the process if I keep writing. But I would say, there's a song called "Can't Look Back," which actually we're just releasing. I don't know when this airs, but it's coming out right now, so it's probably going to be out. But I had this chorus that I really struggled. It's called "Can't Look Back." "You can't look back, you can't look back. There ain't a future in the past. You can't look back." Simple, right?

And I just kept trying to write into that concept, like "For every time someone told you know," and I tried to really Nashville it and write into the concept of can't look back. And I just, it was like, no, this is lame. This is lame. This is lame. And one day I was sitting in my living room, and I was like, "You know, what would I like to hear? What would I just really enjoy listening to over and over again?" I was like, "Some weird stories with a really simple concept like that. Maybe just something that's total left field in the verses."

I wrote this story. One time me and my friends were in Sayulita on this radio trip. And we met this guy named Sonny who had a Volkswagen van. We were eating tacos, and he was like, "Hey. Do you want to

go meet this Argentinian princess royalty?" We're like, "Okay, let's do that." So we jumped in his van. We drove to the middle of nowhere. He woke up this old lady. She came out, and she made food for us. We'd had some beers. Someone pulled out a guitar, and we started singing. Some guy was singing a hymn. And then we all decided to go surfing in the ocean, or we went swimming. So we ended up all skinny-dipping, me and my friends, in the ocean.

I was just like, 'I would like to write about that night.' And I wrote this crazy verse, and just, well what's another story you remember fondly? I tied them all back into this, "you can't look back." It was just this magic moment. I was like, "Yes! I want to play this song for myself over and over again." And those are the moments that I search for, when all the stars align, and the songs are easy, and they just make sense.

**Matt: Relate that for me to your creative process. Some artists that I'll chat with have a really laborious process, and editing is the good work for them. Over and over on the work. You're almost talking about the opposite, maybe, wherein some of the best work is the ones, which is, you're not the only one. Other artists certainly talk about, "Oh, this song wrote itself in 30 seconds." Or whatever. So I guess I just wonder for you, is there a process? Is it just one or the other? Or are there some songs where it's like, "Oh no no no, that one was hard labor, and I love it because of that"?**

**Mat:** You just asked me the question that I ask every writer I ever have a chance with. Because if you want to talk about the greatest resistance in my life, in writing and my art, you just nailed it in that question. Yes, the best songs I've ever written, like Bob Dylan talks about, they wrote themselves. As fast as I could put the pen down to the pad, that's the best song. And I've had that experience. Nothing Left To Lose, [sings] "Come on and sing..." I mean I wrote that in like a half an hour. I just wrote it, and it was so easy.

And there are songs I've worked on for years, and they are terrible, still. That is so frustrating to me. There is no job security in that. There is no reward. My brother's a lawyer. There's no billable hours to that kind of profession. But that's the mystery that makes it so much fun and such a joy, too, of the creative endeavor. It is not a formula. It is this brave desert that there is no rules. You are just out there with courage, trying to find something. And there's moments where it's unfairly easy, and there's moments where it's unfairly difficult. And that's just life, man. And that's why I think this creative endeavor is such an interesting, beautiful, worthy calling.

But yes, there were songs that were super easy. Some of the best stuff. They just, they exist. You just get it, as fast as you can write them down. They generally are the best songs. It pains me to even say that, because I don't want to believe that's true. But then there are a few songs, like Ships in the Night was a song that did really well for me. And it took me six months to find those verses. I always return to that one song. "But there was Ships in the Night. That song, you had to work for it."

But generally, for me, it's finding those moments of ah-ha. Yes. So they may be small bursts, but they are bursts for me. If I'm trying to arm-wrestle a lyric or a song into place, it's generally not the best one. So for me, that could mean putting it down for a minute. It could mean having the discipline in the moment where it's easy to write, to make sure I finish that thing. Like, no, this is too easy right now. Write the frickin' second verse. That I have to be very conscious. That's what discipline looks like for me in these days. "Dude, this is too easy. Remember this moment in two months when you can't write a song. Write the second verse right now. Write something, even if you don't like it. Just try." Because generally, you like it. There you go.

**Matt: Was Grand Canyon that way? It was the first single.**

**Mat:** Yeah, my newest single was easy, yes. It just kind of happened. It was the one. My buddy Eli Teplin, who's a crazy songwriter, was in town. He was staying in my studio. A lot of this new record, we had kind of started. We went out to Joshua Tree, and it was a week of writing with one of my best friends.

Painting. We were just like, "Let's be creative and just hang." So me and Eli were writing songs. Marshall was painting in the corner. And we just, we lost power, randomly. It was this house off the grid in the middle of nowhere. I brought all this studio gear, mics, speakers. I'm like, "I guess we can't use it." So we just had a candle and a guitar. And we ended up writing. It ended up being this whole moment of, oh. This was so easy. I need to return to this thing. Guitar and me. And it was actually really serendipitous.

So Eli came to town, and we were like, "Let's do more of that." We set up some writes with people. Trent Dabbs, who's one of my good friends. He's a songwriter. And Robert Marvin, this guy that I've worked on all my records with. And we had all these formal writes going, and then of course, one night I'd said, "Grand Canyon. Oh that's a good title." We were like, well, but if it wasn't about the Grand Canyon but was like a metaphor. And then as the session's winding down, and we had been grinding on this one song, we just wrote it and produced the whole track, and again, it was like, happened that evening in a matter of hours. Just, yeah, okay, that's easy. It was one of my favorite moments.

**Matt: I love what you said earlier about, I mean you said, "There's no billable hours here." The whole thing being this mystery. Yet, I'm also curious. Are there things that you've managed to learn about maybe the environment that you can create for lightning to strike? In all the experiences, really, I'm a total rookie, and I just learned to....**

**Mat:** No, totally. There's a skillset that's gotten better. There's like, I'm not writing sixteen bar verses anymore. That's a good move, honestly, for the listener. They're like, "God, I'm exhausted of this verse." You do build a skill set. You do have things that work. Like, we're struggling to find the chorus. Well, okay, the verse is landing on the 1 every time. [sings the rhythm] I've learned that if I pick up before the 1, it'll be really – [sings]. You're picking up before the 1. You learn these little tricks. You have some skills to work. Like you've got jukes. If you're like Steph Curry. You're like, well I know my crossover works. It opens me up for this jumper. You can lean on if you need them, so totally you have that bag of tricks that helps you. And then you also, yeah the more swings at-bat, the more I put myself in the room, the more I've got people that inspire me around me, the more times at bat, totally. You're going to get those moments of inspiration. That is 100% true, as much as it is this kind of ah-ha moment.

But yeah, I set up that week to write with my friends. If I wouldn't have set up that week and grinded for a couple songs, we probably wouldn't have found Grand Canyon really easily that evening. So I think they all work together. You working hard creates kind of moments, I hope, that create these ah-ha moments that are really effortless, and it feels like the muse steps in and God steps into the room, or whatever way you describe it. I think they work together. I want to believe they do, because I want my hard work to mean something.

**Matt: You sound very healthy right now. You sound like, you do. You sound like someone who's been at this long enough to know what works, what doesn't. What's healthy, what's not. What boundaries to put up. And to allow for what you really want and value most, and for substantive art to emerge. Does it feel that way to you on the inside?**

**Mat:** I feel like I am having a lot of fun, and there's some joy that's returned to this process. Another form of resistance as you do it for a minute, is it doesn't mean one thing anymore. I wanted to do music only because it was all I wanted to do. That's it. There was no job, no career. When I started, it was just like, that's really fun. You want to go see a movie? I'd rather stay home and write a song. That sounds so fun. So it was this passion. Then people get into it. And then it becomes more nuanced. Like, wow this is my job. Wow. This pays my mortgage. Wow. This pays for my kids' diapers. This takes me away from home, actually, now. This is a nuanced thing. This isn't just one thing. It's like this broad spectrum of a lot of things.

But to come back and return to some of that passion, the beginning of like, “Hey man. I just love doing this. Let’s try to hold onto those moments” is really healthy for me and my personality. Because I tend to like to try different things. Even the music that put me on the map was this really like genre-bending thing. So for me sometimes, of like, simplifying that for me. “You’re still allowed to do whatever you want, but you really have to like it. That’s it. That’s the only rule,” has been really life-giving. And we’ll see if anybody likes it, but so far, when I play it for my community around me, they’re really responding to the art we’ve come up with this year. But time will tell.

**Matt: How easy is it for you to protect that innocence?**

**Mat:** It’s incredibly difficult. I mean, it’s been different at different times in my life. For me, I would say my critique of myself is that there’s a success-oriented thing that can step in, where you’re like, “Oh I could do that. If I put on this hat, it could work.” Kind of silencing that voice, or being smart about, like, it’s okay to be aware of culture. It’s okay to be aware of trends. How do you dialogue with that? But at the end of the day, let’s not chase anything. Let’s just do what we know, and what we love, and what you want to play for your brother in the car. Let’s make that the goal, so that then you’re a little bit bulletproof. You go home, and if you’re excited to play your songs for yourself, it’s hard to argue with that.

Matt: Matt, one more for you, because what you just said sounds like wonderful advice, and yet if I were scrambling, if I were someone who had not made this a career, it might sound like, “Well of course you can say that, because you have an audience. You have an established platform,” etc. Would you still say, “No no no no no, that advice is the right advice to follow, no matter where you’re at? Or would you have something different to say to someone who’s like, “I’m just trying to make this work, man.”

Mat: No, I get the tension of like, “Dude, I’ve got to pay my bills, and this guy’s having me mix country songs that I don’t really care about.” Sure. That never leaves the room. And inasmuch as I’m saying that, I still have to go play. When I’m playing shows, I’ve played private events which pay for a lot of things, and they’re awful. They’re the worst thing on earth. They’re soul-sucking. But they’re, for me, times that are paying the bills. So I understand the tension of that. But no, when it comes to your art, and the passion that’s driving you, I think it’s the most true statement is if you aren’t loving it, what are you doing? If you can’t be excited about it, who is?

Granted, at the end of a record, when I’m done and I’ve worn everything out, and I don’t know which end is up, that’s a reality after every record, too. As much as I’m sounding confident right now, I have low moments, where I’m like, dude I don’t know which end is up. Maybe this is all terrible. I’m terrible. I’m a joke. Yes. Every artist has those peaks and valleys. And I do not deny that that is a reality in my life, nor should anyone be scared of those feelings or those voices. But I do think that driving passion of you loving something, that’s the thing. There was this interview between Rick Reuben and T-Bone Burnett, and T-Bone was like, “I went into this season where I didn’t even know what note to play. I was like, are notes like a thing? And I was kind of deconstructing everything.” And he goes, he met this guy who said, “Hey, when you do find a note, and you decide that that’s the one, then that is the one.”

And there’s something about like you and your commitment and passion to something that is the attraction of other people. There is no right or wrong. There is no yes or no. There is no formula. It’s like you inviting people into something you’re passionate about is also the draw. It’s the exciting part and the attraction. It’s like, you’re the Steve Jobs saying, “No, you don’t need a button on that phone. Nope. No button.” People are like, “No, I need a button.” You’re like, “No, trust me. You don’t need a button.” There has to be some of that in my art. At least, I’ve found that to be true for me. Or else it doesn’t resonate. If it’s not starting with me, then it’s hard to ask someone else to have that feeling about what you do.