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Brad cook produces music. He works with bands like bunny bear Waxahachie, Hiss Golden Messenger, Bruce Hornsby, the Indigo Girls and Kevin Garrett. And he's not just a producer, he played in the bands Megafaun and DeYarmond Edison as well. But he's not what you typically think of when you think of someone in the music industry. He's an introvert and I feel dominated by extroverts. He's chosen to do his work outside the glamorous music spotlights of LA, New York and Nashville, and he's instead lay down his creative roots in a studio in the backyard of his house in Durham. And he's not aiming for quick hits. He seeks a deep creative partnership with the musicians he works with. He produced the most recent pony bear album. In an interview about it, lead singer Justin Vernon said he produced me as a person Just as much as a musician the last few years. But what does that mean to produce someone as a person? We talked with Brad about that question and about how we use this technology to make music we love and about the creative community of musicians, chefs and artists that he's cultivated for himself in Durham. But before we get started, we've actually got two conversations for you today. We recorded our initial chat with Brad several weeks ago, before quarantine life was the new normal. So we thought it'd be useful to do another one, providing an update on what quarantine life is like for someone in the music world. You'll hear the most recent one first, followed by the one we did a few weeks ago. So let's get started.

Brad cook, music producer, thanks for coming back on the podcast.

Brad Cook 1:51
All right. Thanks for having me.

Matt Perault 1:53
So we chatted a couple weeks ago in the world looks pretty different now. (I'm) curious about how you're holding up?

Brad Cook 2:00
I'm holding up okay, actually, I'm lucky. And relatively speaking, you know, my wife and I were, you know, I was sort of in between jobs anyway. I returned home from Texas, Sunday the 15th.

I was in the desert for like the week before that, and I got home the 15th. And my wife and I had been home since then. And we're able to do that in a way that, you know, she had to close her studio, and she did not return to Mexico for a job that she had there.

And so she has lost work. But, you know, she and her partners have pivoted to an online format, and it's been a really successful form.

Matt Perault 2:53
So I’d love to hear more about that. I mean, what, what was she doing and how did it has it translated to online format.

Brad Cook 3:01
So she and her two partners have a studio in Durham on foster street called "Base." And it's plot based studio. And they do private and classes, all sorts of different, you know, teaching formats. And they closed pretty early on, they figured out what was going on and closed early March. And within a week, they sort of figured out a way to start doing online classes. And by doing online classes, I think it sort of forced them into the next phase of what their business and could and should have been anyway; they all felt that. And, you know, the outreach is so much greater now because they can kind of open it up to all their friends and everyone they know, and it's been really cool. It's been really cool to watch him figure it out.

Matt Perault 3:54
That's amazing. And what's it like with the people you work with, so tours are getting canceled. But there's amazing uses of, of online tools to get music to people. So I'm kind of curious what you're hearing from the people you work with.

Brad Cook 4:10
Yeah, I mean, you know, my heart breaks for everybody that had to cancel touring, because that's real shit. And that affects so many people that affects your crew that affects your team that affects so many people. And I would not have wanted to be a booking agent or manager the last two weeks having to reschedule these tours and then in some cases, immediately reschedule them again. Because it looks like it's gonna take a lot longer. And you know, all the festival people. I mean, there's just, there's so much it's just it's hard to consider how much you know, live music is going to take a hit. And I think for bigger bands, they have a little bit more of a nest egg but for some of the smaller bands, that is how they make all of their income.

So, that part of it's hard, you know, I feel that And on the flip side, I think a lot of people are able to use this time to reflect and kind of make cool shit, make new shit. You know?

Matt Perault 5:18
Like, what, what are what are you seeing on the creative side?

Brad Cook 5:22
Well, obviously you see a lot more people online, posting what they're doing and what they're working on.

I'm excited for, you know, streaming shows as a concept. I'm very, that's something that's excited me for a long time. I'm waiting for it to get weirder and cooler.

Unknown Speaker 5:44
It's pretty simple right now, and I appreciate that people are just trying to figure it out. But I think I'm already ready for the next phase of whatever that is. And people really make it their
own. And what that looks like and I think that's going to force some creativity. I think it's going
to force a lot of shit right now. I think we're gonna be seeing a lot of people online right now. 
Cause everyone's trying to figure it out.

Brad Cook  6:08
But I'm excited by it. I like watching people figure it out.

Matt Perault  6:11
So for local bands, I've seen some cool examples of different things like Mandolin Orange did a
live concert from their living room. And, yeah, Sylvan Esso. So Amelia Meath, like, did a
livestream of making biscuits, and one morning, which was awesome. And Hiss Golden
Messenger is doing like music instruction and stuff, which kind of seems extraordinary. So it
seems like there have been amazing things I assume, while you're encouraged by all the
creative uses, like the question for the artist is going to be how do you actually make some
money at some point doing this, when you think about live streaming concerts? Are you
thinking about a revenue model associated with that?

Brad Cook  6:49
Oh, absolutely. I think Instagram is a nice, fun public access version of it.

But I think there's a lot I mean,

Did we talk about like VR concerts when you're here

Matt Perault  7:04
No, no.

Brad Cook  7:06
I don't want to say too much about this. But like, I'm thinking about that right now. Like that's, I
think that there's going to be a monster future and virtual reality concerts. And the way that
you can make a pretty immersive and incredible sounding thing for people. And it'll be way
more affordable and going on tour. And it has a chance to appeal to way more people
immediately and in perpetuity. And I think that that's exciting to me. You know, and, and so
like, I mean, I love the idea of sitting on my couch and watching people do something with that
much vulnerability. You know, if it's real, and it's in real time, I like the chats. I like the
conversation around it. I like watching people how their inside jokes unfold. I like that stuff.

Matt Perault  7:58
Yeah, (for) Amelia Meath it was Pretty funny. She when she was in the middle of making
biscuits, she went to borrow milk or something, I think from a neighbor. There's just that kind
of stuff that's like pretty funny and really humanizing for people you're just used to seeing on
stage.

Brad Cook  8:12
Yeah, yeah. And I think we're figuring it out, you know, like, the first wave of reality TV was wild. Like, there's a wild west component to this right now that I think is interesting. I think we'll be able to monetize it. As soon as you know, they figure out how to be better at it.

You know, I imagine if you're really good at this, and you find out a way to make it your own, you're gonna appeal to a lot more people than might have just come across you based on your music.

Matt Perault  8:42
Is that a dream that's kind of deferred for another day, or are there things that you can do if we're stuck in quarantine for six months? Are there things that you think people can be doing to try to move this model so that it's accessible? Even over the next few months?

Brad Cook  8:58
Definitely. Man, I think this have the time to make it, figure it out. You know what I mean? Like, look, if you just kind of turn on Instagram Live, then taking anything, adding any dimensionality to it is immediately better. You know what I mean? Like, there's some kids out there, they're gonna figure out a way to do all this with layers, and it will look like crazy new TV. I really think so. And I think it'll take like, it's gonna hyperspeed people's creativity right now to figure out how to make it fresh. So I think it'll happen sooner than it would have naturally. There wasn't really a need for I don't think people are really like, Oh, man. I don't really want to watch that much Instagram TV.

Matt Perault  9:41
Right, exactly.

Brad Cook  9:43
What the hell else are you gonna do if that's where the actions at you know?

Matt Perault  9:46
So for those parts of your work? I'm kind of curious how much of it you can get done remotely like in my world as a professor or doing policy work. There's an enormous amount you can do just from a desk with a computer. Is that true for this as well like if you're trying to push to think about how VR can be used for music with a revenue model attached to it, can you just do that remotely without kind of traveling around to meet people face to face?

Unknown Speaker  10:11
Yeah, I mean, conversations on the phone and, you know, using VR and understanding what it actually feels like in certain circumstances. And understanding what those technologies are. I mean, there's a lot of research to be done right now for sure. And then on top of all of it, even if I'm not the first one to figure this out, you know, I have my own version of what I think it could be. And that's all I really interested in trying to figure out right now. You know, just have a really clear idea of a way to make it fun and cool.
And do you feel like you one of the things we talked about in our conversation, which people who are listening to this will hear momentarily, is about the space for deep work and trying to set aside time to do deeper, more creative projects. And I think people have a range of reactions to the current moment in terms of that because I think some people just feel so much anxiety that it's hard to have depth for their work, even if they're home at a desk and it's quiet. I'm curious what that's been like for you like, do you feel like you have space and kind of brain space to devote to that type of work?

Yeah, I do. I feel a little guilty about that to be honest with you, but there's no physical way to help other than donate money, which is all my wife and I can do when we're feeling bad about something. Is you know, we were just so in that regard. Yeah, I mean, I have my studio and I've been out there working and making stuff and, you know, whatever. Creativity needs to be you know, my wife is if again, she's teaching politics but you know, she's also keeping us both working out and you know, staying mentally fit We take long walks every day we do you know workouts in the house we do you know whatever. We sort of just reimagined Our house is like two different spaces. One's a fitness place. One's a recording studio.

Yeah. So last question, then I'll let you get back to planning the future of virtual reality music, and I'll let our listeners listen to the rest of the conversation that we had a few weeks ago, but what's on your quarantine playlist?

Oh, boy. I mean, that's a good question. I've been just listening to a ton of stuff. I mean, I haven't like I said, making a ton of stuff. And my brother sent me five and a half hours of music.

Five and a half hours of new music?

Yeah, well, that's which is 78 70 77 songs. To come to and just listen to and check out and you know, just in case we decided to work on stuff together. There's a lot of that going on. I have, you know, just different creative projects or people are sending stuff here and I'm sending stuff there. So to be honest with you, I've been listening to a lot of new music, which I don't know. I don't know how relevant it is to people's interests. I'm trying to think of a record that that oh, here's one. Alabaster de Plume,
That record is an incredibly chill, like, awesome, reset.

Matt Perault 13:34
Cool. Well, thank you for the recommendation. Thanks for coming back on. let you get back to your quarantine life and let our listeners listen to the rest of our of our conversation.

Brad Cook 13:45
Thanks again. Yeah, I hope everyone's staying safe out there. And we're here, you know.

Matt Perault 13:53
So that was Brad cook recently talking about his experience with the corona virus. And now let's listen to the original conversation. Recorded several weeks ago. Brad Cook, producer. Welcome to the podcast.

Brad Cook 14:06
Thank you for having me.

Matt Perault 14:07
Is that the right title?

Just producer.

Just producer.

So what does being a producer mean?

Brad Cook 14:15
Being a producer to me, means like, I mean a lot of things to a lot of people.

Matt Perault 14:21
So this is our podcast, I think a lot of the people who listen to our podcast are policy professionals, lawyers, people in academia, they are not producers of music. So what is a producer for lawyers, which is which is even lower than the producer for dummies? This is the explanation producer for lawyers.

Brad Cook 14:39
I love that. I then I, you know, I get contacted by an artist and they asked me to help them make a record. And sometimes that involves me, doing a lot wearing a lot of different hats, performing arranging, writing. Other times, it's just quietly literally helping people have the space to do what they're trying to do. I'm not Even weighing in so much on what the final aesthetic is. Even though at the end of the day that the artists that are having those kind of conversations I work with artists have a really clear idea of what they want, they just need help doing it. And I feel like my experience is just that I know who to call, I know where to go. I know
what you know, I know music theory, it's really easy for me to just sort of interpret what they're telling me and then help them do that.

Matt Perault  15:24
And then how do you make decisions about who you work with, like the kinds of musicians you want to work with, or the kinds of work you want to do with the musicians you choose to work with?

Brad Cook  15:33
You know, it varies. I mean, the first thing is I've just try to hang out with them and see what the vibe is like, we're going to get along as people. We're going to be comfortable in the space together. And I'm going to help I can usually read if my body language is putting on at ease or not. But I just yeah, it's not like you know, in the 60s or you hear these stories and stuff like that. It can be a pretty dry experience, but special to us making it you know, it's literally like we're doing pretty one thing like building a house. , we're gonna frame it up. We're gonna do the drywall. We're gonna put swatches all over the place where our colors we want.

Matt Perault  16:27
Yeah. So what does that actually what does that actually mean? I mean, what I mean, again, I'm not a musician. I think the people who are listening to this many of them are most of them are not musicians. What isn't putting up the drywall mean?

Brad Cook  16:40
Putting up the drywall to me means let's say an artist shows up with a song. They can perform that song by themselves and like an acoustic guitar or a piano, any other instrument, whatever it whatever their instrument is.

They prefer they show me what they're working with. And then we have a discussion about how what kind of experience you're trying to have in there. Consider drywall. Like, what instrumentation Are we going to use? What are we going to pad this out with? Is this going to be a loud song or a soft song? What's the tempo? Where is the vocal delivery going to hit? Because if a song is too slow, and the vocal delivery is too slow, it won't be like a max impact. Those kind of details do matter. Like that's the stuff I'm really excited about, like, what's the best way to present this? And, you know, it can be finding the right engineer for the circumstance, it can be finding the right musicians for the circumstance. Some people bring their own musicians and that's a whole other calibration situation. But yeah, that's really what it is, is just helping them find a way to present what they're doing.

So you work with musicians who have incredibly textured, I don't know what the right word is manufactured, almost sound. So I'm thinking of people like Justin Vernon, Bon Iver and Kevin
Garrett is you know, very intricate, lots of electronic sound type of type of music. Then you work with people who are really stripped down. So I think of like Hiss Golden Messenger and Waxahachie. How do you think about, like the layers of music that you're trying to create and which acts should have the more intricate sound or, or use a lot of electronic sounds and the music and which ones sort of stand on their own in a more stripped down type of type of sound?

I mean, again, it's it is artists to artists, and it's sort of based on what that artist is trying to accomplish. And, you know, with an artist like Waxahachie, Katy would come with just some very, you know, sparse acoustic guitar or Fender Rhodes piano or something like that. And we talked a lot about what she wanted it to sound like. And, you know, did she want acoustic guitars? Or does she want this kind of instrumentation? Is she okay? If we put in a few synthesizers here and there? Is that something that feels like it's not it's not within your taste or whatever. Maybe with someone like Justin or Kevin Garrett. I just think they're they have an internal curiosity about sound in a different way. And I think they're looking to sort of create a different universe for their song to live in as opposed to, like, find maybe the most essential way to perform or to play that or arrange that song. I love so much different music that I couldn't work on. I mean, I don't really work on anything as technically involved as Justin. Partly because we've done that, in some way, shape, or form. We've been experimenting together our whole lives. So to like retreat with someone else when someone's like, Can we do that vocal effect? I'm just like, no. No, because it's not exciting to me. You know what I mean? We I don't get into those. I try to vet that kind of situation pretty hard.

Matt Perault  19:53
You know, you mean because your feeling of working with Justin is that's where you want to push the the Technological bounds.

Brad Cook  20:01
Yeah, experience it or be a part of it, you know, like, we have a shared, like a shared vocabulary in history that, you know, we discover something or we have an experiment together and he does a lot of stuff on his own. Like it's a non stop train. But I don't have we don't, there's a certain part of it. We don't have to retreat every time we do that. Whereas if I'm going to start from scratch, it's on. I have to contextualize like, how I shouldn't say, I do I have that feeling of like, do I need to tell this person? How far out I'm willing to go? ]Or do I need to explain this person? How far I have already gone? Mm hmm. You know, I mean, like, it's hard for me to get psyched about that same experience twice. I'm very comfortable having it once. And, you know, like, I love the artists I work with. I like love them to death. And I love when they call me to do on work on stuff again. But I'm also really comfortable like, it's not territorial to me. I'm really comfortable, letting our experience with Be a really powerful and special experience and they need to grow and find a new producer for the next idea they have. It's like exciting thing to me. You know. And so it's just it's, you know, it's a different experience altogether. I don't really have a preference either way, if something's more layered or more modern, or more simple or sparse, whatever it may be. It's really just artists, artists and what they're trying to do.
Yeah, no, you're delivering the vision

Yeah, I'm helping them do that. And I be careful to say that because I think we grew up with the producers or is a misunderstood power role? I don't think of it that way. I think of it as a facilitator role more than anything. And there's times I'm I help make decisions. That's part of my job is that I'm sharing a type of responsibility with the artist, but it's their thing. They gotta live with this. I have to go out there. And that's something I try to be very sensitive to have, like, what's going to help them feel like they can wear this for a year, year and a half horrible Gotta go out there and play those songs and you know, so you're also trying to find little exciting moments within that creative process that's like something they can come back to is like, this help gave this song and identity and now when I play this, I think about that how this song just feels a certain way to me now or whatever that may be.

Yeah. And then how does the what the work that you're trying to do as a music producer? How does that relate to your relationship with the people who you're producing? There's this amazing line in this incredible video that the New York Times did called Diary of a song about the bunny bear song I am I. Yeah, where Justin Vernon says, Brad really produced me as a person in the last couple of years. And he's talking about his struggles with fame and trying to figure out how to his role as an artist against that backdrop and figure out how to deliver this creative moment in this song against the backdrop of what he's been experiencing as a person over the last couple years. And he says very explicitly in this video that you were the person who got him there. So he talks about it in the big context sort of just talking about generally you producing him as a person. And then he says very specifically that there's this moment where you come to him and you're like, the song is ready for you to sing. Like, we need your lyrics. We need you to sing on this now. And then he delivers this unbelievable line. And so I'm curious about about that part, like the mixture between the creation of this physical product sort of the song itself, and then your relationship with the people who are behind the songs.

Yeah. You know, it's, it's, it's just compartmentalised. In some ways. I like my relationship to Justin, and how I know him, allows for a type of intimacy in our conversations. And just sort of where we're both at in life right now. It's just with a constantly evolving relationship and friendship and it is professional and personal. That said, it's fun because a lot of it with Justin is like making making a record was a lot of people. We had 24 people down there. We were doing this So in some ways, there's like a little bit of a structure to it all. You know, like there's there were three of us that I would say, you know, Justin and Chris Messina, who travels with Justin everywhere he goes, and his like his engineer, producer, just sort of great friend. I mean, a lot of roles. But Chris is really there all the time for everything. And he runs his studio, and so on, so forth. Chris is really good at organizing things. And he's really good at tempering Justin as well. And I just think when you have a lot of people coming to you all the time, it's just that's part of the problem is that it just wears and I think with this circumstance in this record, once
we got on the ground to make it, it was really easy to kind of set up a little bit of a buffer between Justin and everything else that was happening. We sorta had Justin in. He was sort of in his own space. He had his own studio and he was working, but he would float around and stuff but you know, I was with the band and other engineers and producers and we're sort of actually just recording music too. And then I think part of that is that Justin's not in the room having to answer every question. I think there's he delegates a lot of trust. So for me, I'm able to say like, let's do like this, let's try this, let's do this, let's do this. And then kind of organize with the band throughout the day, put a song together, everyone gives their input. We just sort of are able to have a discussion. I think when when the band and I are working together, we're able to have a discussion. Really clearly about, you know, assess all the ideas. Well, what we think is a great idea and one that's not as essential. Yeah, and then just go for it. But we talk before we record anything, we really talked to the song together. And I think that kind of stuffs important establishing, you know what I mean? Like, yeah, especially when there's that many people that are brilliant, and did you guys ever play golf? lawyers will understand this reference. Yeah, but in that kind of circumstance, it's a type of tournament play called Best ball right now just an undeniable, you're always all playing from whoever had the best shot. And it helps move the game along and at the end of the day you end up with like a great score because you played off everyone's strengths a whole game. And I sort of see making records like that too.

Matt Perault  26:16
Yeah. And can you I, I don't know if there was a particular moment where things fell into place on that song. But it it does seem to me like there is a moment of genius. Like you're getting an incredible artist at a moment of sort of peak creativity. And then he delivers this line on a bright fall morning. I'm with it. It's a little while within it. And that to me, when I watch The Diary of a song video in the New York Times, I get emotional every time I hear that and it feels like it's it's the musical equivalent of like, Michael Jordan in a playoff game, scoring 60 points or you know, it's it's this beautiful moment like a an amazing artist at his peak. What was happening Then that created that the space for that to be delivered?

Brad Cook  27:06
I mean, that song is funny. And I'm glad they profiled it on this because it's hard to explain how much some of us lived with that song in real time. From the first six years. I mean, that song was six years old. At least key parts of it were six years old. And Justin never let that fire go out. It would always be he was just like, dilligent like, the first time like, it's gotta be the first song on the record. And the whole time I was like, God, this sucks. There's no way to make this the first time on the record. And we we had this you know, in that circumstance. Part of it is like knowing you're not the person to do it. You know, like, I wouldn't found Andrew Harlow. I love and he's a friend of mine, but you know, he's an modern young producer. Yep, brilliant. does all the big thief records bunch of other stuff that people love. He came out and just worked on that song for a day and a half, He took before any of us did anything to it. We just decided to give it to someone who knows nothing about it was no. who was not over. It was not anything, just let him see if there's something to find. And he did he like carved out a chorus. And then
when he left, Marta, the other one of the other engineers and myself sort of constructed a crude map. And then we had the band sort of retract or all of it.

And then it was one of those things.

Matt Perault  28:25
So what does that mean? What does a crude map mean? What does it relate back?

Brad Cook  28:28
We kind of decided with that song. And when you hear it, it feels like there's like very distinct sections. And so we sort of took those sections and like, quite literally copied parts and like moved it around and built yet another arrangement or like version of that song that, you know, has the vocal here and that has a chorus here and that has this build here and part of it was just being prepared and ready to do that. But I think once we had everyone there, it was easy to like Just go. And then it was one of those things where I gave it to Justin. He loved it. But then he started tinkering with it. And he came back. And it was one of those things where we kind of had this joking. It was funny, but it was like, No, you got to put it back the way it was. And it's time to saying it's like no more tinkering. Let's do this, you know? And he did, man. And like the vocals for that record. I'll say this. He did them all in two days. Wow.

Matt Perault  29:25
All this work that you're talking about on the song, that line on a bright call morning is still not in the song.

I don't think it was there were all sorts of placeholder lyrics. We'd have to listen to this version. That line might have been there this whole time. I don't actually recall. I just remember when it was go time. There are actually words for it. And when he's saying it was do we all cried in the studio to Yeah, like, I've been hearing him sing for 20 years, and it's still when Justin like leads into a vocal take. It's pretty grueling. There's like three of you in the room and it's just like f***.

Brad Cook  30:00
Yeah, that kind of stuff. So yeah, I would have to revisit. It's funny cuz that, you know, made seven albums since then. So,

yeah, in some ways, it's I'm trying to remember the exact order of things, but it was just like that whole record was like an incredible experience. You know, I've never done anything like it. I don't know if I'll ever do anything like that again.

Matt Perault  30:20
Can you talk a little bit about how the craft of music making has evolved since you started making music, because that album in particular has so many different types of sounds in it. And one thing in the diarrhea song that really struck me was that just the vast number of contributions from different people who in their own independent lives performed very different types of music, we actually found Velvet Negroni through through that diary of the
song and that's actually the intro music for a podcast. And so the the spirit of it seemed to be like taking these little contributions from lots and lots of different people and some of them are just incredibly small sounds that are creative and beautiful, but until they're broken up, at least for me just as a casual consumer of music, you don't really hear them. And it made me think that that making music seems totally different than what I expected it to be. They certainly can be you're pulling together all these different things or you can as you say, you can be pulling together all these different sounds from different people. And some of these sounds are super bizarre like I am I opens with, like this radio going on and off and a cardboard sliding across a floor.

Brad Cook 31:29
What is music? Yeah, I think about that a lot. And I, I guess, the part I'm grateful for my relationship with like Justin and my brother, Phil and Joe. Yeah, the forum is the three musicians I've been playing with the longest. Megafaun is a lot like this, too. We just sort of all subconsciously abandoned form at a very young age. When we were living in Eau Claire, and we were in our teenagers. We had a crazy band that had no attention to traditional song form at all. All of our bands sometimes we would dabble in dry medicine, I would say is the closest we got to trying to write songs like a verse chorus verse, bridge chorus, which is like the standard pop music formula and try and make a song under four minutes and try and say something in under four minutes. And since we were young, I think we just if it sounded good to us, and the mood was intact. The emotion was intact. We just sort of went with it. I don't think that's totally unique to our scene. I think that's a lot of people from our age, but where technology is really influences like, streaming music, access to music. You can really juxtapose it's like everything that's happening now. You know, the food world has gone through a similar Renaissance. Yeah, like similar. You know, umami means a lot of different things. And I really I love that because I think about like, you know, 20 years ago, I was playing noise music with Joe and we were doing a lot of really harsh, crazy stuff. It was really exciting. We're young and Do I care to go through the experience now not as much, it's not as exciting to me. However, there's times where like the right kind of noise is the perfect umami in a track. And I think about the way that techniques work like that of like, you know when you can draw from a lot of things that give you salt and think about all the different, you know, fish head, whatever guts of anything, or there's so many components that you can achieve, like flavor and depth of flavor and salt with as a chef, but I thought the same thing about music, you can put a track of the sounds like for things, but the way that those things have been considered is like an unexplainable feeling of like, Oh, this feels fresh, but it's not but it is, but it's not. And I think that's the same concept to me is like umami.

So can you give us a couple of examples of what the umami bomb might be in music. So we're sitting in your studio now? I'm looking at six guitars, five guitars, banjo, there's a computer, how are all the things that are in here, getting into something that I might be listening to, as I'm looking at a computer. So I'm curious, is that just the bridge between all the instruments that you have here? Or is the is the computer an instrument in itself? And if so, what does that mean?
Definitely, it's kind of all the above this world over here all my little keys and synths I'll try and use those in unorthodox ways. Because you know, with pop music taking over one thing I don't know if you guys have heard there's like a real funny it's funny to me. But there's this big conversation about electric guitar being dead.

It's a rampant music conversation.

Matt Perault 34:32
Can you give us like the pro and the con?

Brad Cook 34:34
because commercially speaking, yeah, big guitar bands are no longer famous. There was a 50 year run, where the biggest bands in the world performed on electric and acoustic guitar and they might have on in their shell like Post Malone and walk out there and strum a guitar but it's kind of funny, and it's sort of just like to show you that you can do it, but the rest of the time he's out there and there's no band you're watching. We're watching like this whole new dawn of artists perform with no bands. I think that has to do with like, reality TV star, all these kind of shows where or like karaoke culture, I think people just whether or not musicians are ever going to want to say this, but like, people just really, ultimately respond to the human voice and what you have to say that's the part that's singular. I mean, like, everybody has this synthesizer, Juno 106, or everybody's recording on Pro Tools and using the same interfaces. So like, if you start with a voice, anything you do under that is sort of fair game, as long as the voice is preserved in a certain way. And I just think we're seeing what that looks like in a lot of different ways. So to answer your question, one way I think about it is like if I get some of these voices out there and the fun way, if there's a way to dip a texture in there that you're not quite certain about, again, you can't pinpoint why you like this or why it's comforting to you, but you like it. I think that's a victory. Because it's it's not as immediate as something you would see is like, Oh, that's a piano. You're getting detected as a piano and then it's like, okay, Mystery solved, but when you just started reacting to what the collective Sound is I think that can mean something slightly different. And Pro Tools has allowed us to get very surreal. I mean, Bon Iver's records exist because of Pro Tools. And Kevin Garrett's record is just as opposed was because of the way that you can edit. And the way that you can manipulate sound on a computer is like CGI. It's no different than what we're seeing in movies. Now. It eliminates a type of intimacy. Just like the new Star Wars movies don't feel like the original not just because we were old. It was because those are like watching a band performing the room. It's really intimate. It's really vulnerable. You're watching actors up close the whole film. And when you see a Star Wars movie now there's so they can show you this grand scale in a different way of like, outer space is no longer George Lucas finding a little model right in front of a backdrop right, like, bunch of computer nerds making half the movie and that's kind of like there's a lot of modern Production Music like that, too. They're just a bunch of computer wizards making tracks, you know, and, and sometimes that's exciting. Sometimes it feels like CGI feels like it dates itself immediately. And, you know, is the Lord of the Rings still as good? 15 years later it was when it came out right? Or to look a little bit funny, maybe? I don't know.
So I'm kind of in a lot of other contexts, people talk a lot about technology sort of distancing them from things that are real. Like I think the the quintessential thing would be you're across from someone you love a spouse, a parent, a friend, and you're both on your phones, and you're not talking to each other. And I think that a version of that conversation plays out in lots of different contexts. Like, we can work 24 hours a day, because we're bringing our phones home with us and our phone has our work, email and stuff on it. Do you feel in music, like the technology is bringing you closer to the center of what music is? Or does it feel like it's a barrier that's kind of distancing you from the thing that you love most about the profession?

Wow, great question. Something to think about every day, I think is distancing us. I think it's ruining people's creativity. I think within art within music within just speaking to music. I think the certain technologies have, they just actually go up against the fundamentals of creativity to me, I think that some of the best creativity I've ever experienced and I've ever observed is when people are truly not just like present, but they're not judging what they're doing in real time. They're just making things and they're not having a reaction and they're not. They're just having fun, and they're just making and then maybe the next day you listen to it, and you're like, oh, that was pretty cool. That was awesome. That was cool. But trying to have that in the moment, if, in my field, if you start chiming in with opinions very quickly about something, it will really change the creative process. It changes the purity of the creative process. Now you're talking about negotiating the creative process, not just like letting it go through you. I think things like Instagram forced us to turn inward and like look at ourselves and like, have a type of reaction. Really quick and I think for musicians that create I just see it all the time, it just creates so much anxiety. I, every musician, I talk to everybody that comes to work with me, we have a really deep conversation early on about the anxieties they're experiencing because of the expectations that have come on social media on their career. And in some cases, these are people that have only had social media their whole life, like I can remember when we didn't have Facebook, right? We're jammin and like, Well, that was that it was just us. And now people are even like, do I put this to a story? Do I make this a live story? We're in the studio is an intimate like, What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to? Is this what people want? You know, right? You just see me like, Whoa, what people want is for you to make a great song. Truly. Yeah. That's what they know you for. That's what they're hoping for. And in some cases, you know, the flip side is that people that can't write that kill it at social media have huge careers. You know what I mean? They have ghost writers and all their songs. They're really they're like camera ready. They're beautiful. They're excited they're engaged with their social media but their music suffering from it know the sustainability of it suffering from it the all these other things because I just think people are scared to confront stillness, you know, they're scared to like, feel like Oh, if I don't engage here, am I gonna? Is my career gonna go away? we've been a lot of musicians have been conditioned to think that.

Matt Perault  40:21
And and yet you work with several people who use technology unbelievably well so yeah, Boniva is a good example of it. And Amelia and Nick from Sylvan, so their Instagram account is unbelievable and gives you a real sense of connection to them and connection to a place and
even this morning when I was prepping for this, I was looking at your Instagram story and you were listening to Makaya McCraven. Which I've listened to before and loved and so I was like listening along and thinking it was a good way to prep for this interview. And so it seems like even as you have anxiety about it, you and people in your community are using it in this way that really feels to me like it gets a ton of value.

Totally. And that's not to say it can't I just think it's it's finding that balance internally, right? Where are the boundaries here Now? I don't take social media very serious for what it's worth. I don't have Facebook. I don't have Twitter. I do have Instagram, but I don't use it. I don't mind it. Like the things I follow. I follow the art account. I see it as inspo. And I find my times to like, engage on that and like, see what my friends are doing and stuff like that. But it's not part of my creative process at all.

Brad Cook 41:30
Right before we started this, you were talking about, you're essentially talking about turning people down, saying that as a producer, you're making decisions about who you want to work with, and then other people you don't want to work with. And what you just said is making me think about that, because it seems like you have a particular thought of what success means for you. You could use Instagram and Facebook and Twitter and stuff. It sounds like more and maybe that would contribute to more followers and more of a certain type of success. And you could say yes to people who come to you and want you to produce their records, and your Not saying yes to all of them, you're clearly not maximizing your desire for financial return. But you might also not be maximizing your desire for like, other things, lots of followers that you know that might come for that. How do you think about it? Like, what are you trying to achieve? And when you're saying no, and you're turning down money, or followers or whatever it is, what is going on with you internally?

It's a great question. I mean, for starters, I'm not expansionist. I'm not I hate capitalism. I hate capitalism, like you can't believe. And I think it's the root cause of everything wrong with our, with our country, for sure. That said like for what I do. It's, it's embarrassing how well compensated I am honestly. And, you know, in some ways, I get points on records that pay me forever. I get a check for almost every record I work on. There's some percentage of back end that follows me in my life. So it's not like touring. We go out there and you play a gig and that's that and you get home from a tour and that. There's a constant Sort of you can sort of build some stability into this. But yeah, I mean, I'm not I'm not interested in legacy. I don't you don't see paraphilia floating around here of like my achievement. I'm not that kind of stuff. That that's like the bathroom enforcement. That's the part where it's like, I don't it's not going to help me. You know what Justin I did when we were 15 or what? You know, Megafaun did then yeah, those trophies don't add up to what when I bring a new artist in here. I'd like it to just feel like a clean, great place to jump off of the Bart Simpson painting on the wall. I mean, like, whatever. That's like the point of view you're gonna find in here. One Lakers autograph. But like, you know, it is funny. I just, I just try to find good people. I feel like I get asked to do stuff. And it's, you know, I was just going over my schedule with my management this morning. And like, you know, it's one of those things where like, I'm either gonna have a lot of downtime or
Like we're trying to find my schedule for the spring. Sometimes stuff gets you start feeling it's not. We don't can't find the time, we'll just I'm very comfortably like, let's just let go of it. If this person needs to make this record, then like, I don't want to change my urgency towards that note, rather have them feel like they're doing it and step with their own momentum. And I'm not the person for this round. But yeah, I don't know. It's funny with the tech stuff. I do think about that. I sometimes think in my field, artists know that I'm not going to engage that with like, there's no my privacy's intact with them. You know, there's been a lot more people that have come through here, that I haven't even made records that are like extremely famous people. And I love that they feel safe to come here and they don't feel exploited to come here and they don't feel like I'm using it to benefit because that would be the whole point is that I'm using it to promote my own brand myself, and that goes against everything I'm trying to do, which is help other people with their thing. It's weird.

Matt Perault  44:56
That sounds like a great place to be mentally. Just Your approach to your profession, in part because someone said to me once satisfaction is the ratio of achievement to aspiration.Meaning like, it's not just about what you achieve, it's about what you want to achieve and and you've achieved enormous amount. But it sounds like you have a settled sense of what you're trying to get done in the world and therefore you get satisfaction from having kind of a realistic ratio between what you're aiming for and what you can do. That sounds like a very powerful internal clock.

Has it always felt that way to you?

Brad Cook  45:31
Yeah, I think I've had a big vibe my whole life in that regard. I didn't necessarily handle it well. And I don't know that I always do still like it is a constant. But it's like a balance you know, it's like everything in life like your confidence fluctuate throughout the day. Like it does throughout the week to the month of the year through all these things. I just my you know, compass is pointed towards a very deeply personal internal sense of satisfaction. I am not at all influenced by what anyone else is gonna tell me. And that's been there my whole life. And it gives me a lot of courage now like it. I don't I don't ever feel like I'm making a brave decision when I do things or anything like that. It just feels like, does this feel true to myself at the end of the day, kind of look in the mirror and decide if I handled that well and know how to get the best. And so I'm just always sort of trying to calibrate. You know what that is? You know, if I make a record, I
already love it. By the time we're done by the time I'm agreeing to work with someone I already know, we've already arrived at a place where I'm gonna put myself into this. And I love every record I've made. I feel proud of what we were able to do. You know what I mean? Like all that kind of stuff, but like, they don't all do the same. They don't have the same response outside of that.

Matt Perault 47:33
I know what you mean. And yet, it's hard to achieve. It's really hard to not look at something you've done and say that thing could be a little better and just to allow it to exist for what it is.

Brad Cook 47:44
Yeah, it is. It is a funny thing. And it's, it maybe was something I fought when I was younger, and I don't find it at all. I trust my instincts in the moment of what we're doing enough to like, sort of always be like, I don't second guessed, you know, it's nice. It's not like an arrogance or confidence thing. It's just like I just measured twice and cut once. I feel like that's always sort of been my strategy with music. And by the time it's done, I'm just that was that was awesome. I learned so much. You know, every record teaches me so much.

Matt Perault 48:15
How'd you end up in Durham? So we're, we're in a studio in the back of your house in a small neighborhood in Durham. You could be doing this in LA, you could be doing it in Brooklyn and you grew up in Wisconsin, you could be doing this in a lot of different places. Why are you doing it here?

Brad Cook 48:30
Because I love this town. This town, like excites me and inspires me and gives me like a lot of energy. You know, we were talking about this earlier, but it is so strange to have that feeling every day, but I have it everyday here. I've never met it where we are.

Matt Perault 48:45
So how did you how did you end up here? So you're in Wisconsin, and then whatever?

Brad Cook 48:51
Yeah, whatever. Yeah, we were living in Wisconsin. We had just graduated college that my brother and I my brother There's now wife Heather, who is part of our whole crew going. She's a big part of this story too. And then our friend Kyle, who is started the pony source brewery, And we all just sort of came up with this idea one night to like, let's move, we got to move somewhere. We're all feeling like, again, we were feeling the bias reinforcement. Yeah, play the same two bars. Every month. We'd sell those shows to the same people who had the same response to our band. And it wasn't honest to us. It wasn't like we weren't being challenged. So we picked the place because we had no experience about leaving home. And we picked up Raleigh Durham. Yeah, drove down here. We stayed in Garner for a week, I looked at all three cities. This is in 2005.
Matt Perault 49:43
Right. So Durham wasn't Durham.

Brad Cook 49:46
There wasn't one I still think this is funny, but like other people will confirm there wasn't one place to eat.

Yeah, downtown isn't downtown. Yeah, you go to a movie at the Carolina theater. Yeah, you could walk to a baseball game. Yeah. And if you sit sat behind home plate at the baseball game, the only thing You could see was the jail. Exactly.

Matt Perault 50:01
Yeah, it was. So that part of it is funny to me and we moved to Raleigh first. We lived in Raleigh for a year. And then we moved to Durham. And I don't I still is funny to me. We knew nobody here. We really I think parts of this story get mixed up. But we didn't know Merge records. We put it we put it together when we got here. But it wasn't like let's go to there and we'll try and get signed to merge. Yeah, we had no, we just pick somewhere that wasn't a big city that we could like develop in. Yeah, it wasn't where we grew.

So just for people who don't know what's Merge,

Brad Cook 50:31
Merge records, the big, legendary independent record label down here, based in downtown based in downtown and at the time we moved here, there, just to put out the Arcade Fire's first record, so they're they're really having a moment. But yeah, we just like do we lucked out. I got hired at school kids records. Two weeks after we moved here and the first person I worked with was grace and Kern, who is the forever editor, the indie week and Pitchfork, music critic and all this other stuff. He was my best friend within a week of here. And he taught me so much about this area in the music scene and introduced us to so many people wrote about our band a lot. At the same time, Justin had met a bunch of people at a restaurant he was working at that, like gave us our first show, you know, we just we just sort of fell into it here and had bought houses as soon as we could afford to. planted our flag. I was just like, this is it. Every time we go on tour, we'd be glad to get back to Durham.

Matt Perault 51:29
Yeah, there's that that moment when you fly into the airport, where you get where you're kind of hanging out over the pine trees, and yes, all of a sudden, you can feel everything relax.

Brad Cook 51:37
Yeah, and I do feel that way. Yeah, I feel so relaxed here. And that change that started to change immediately when we got here? I felt less anxious and I had been my whole life. So yeah, it is it's funny to think about but you know, I still do travel. I do work in LA in New York. Nashville. All these other cities. I spent 12 weeks in Texas. Last year, but I'm just trying to get
everything back to Durham. You know, like, I just want people to come here and experience this town.

Matt Perault  52:06
And when people come here and they come to this studio or other studios you work in. Did they feel like it's good for their creativity?

Brad Cook  52:14
Yeah. I mean, maybe I'm biased, but everybody I've worked with, it's coming to their home to work. Had an absolutely great time here. I can't believe how good the food is. They can't believe how cool the weather is. You know, like a lot of people like the studio we're in right now. It just, I think they just feel at home. It's not, it doesn't ask a lot of you to be in here. I reckon I can record a drum set, really, but there's plenty of space for people to like, dig in. And it's not pretentious.

Matt Perault  52:39
So can you talk a little about the community here in the artistic and food community that seems like it's pretty tight knit? I read a piece I think it was in vogue recently about Ashley Christensen's wedding. Ashley Christiansen just won the James Beard award for best chef in the country and is the owner of among other restaurants, pools diner, my favorite favorite Beasley's chicken and And so this in this piece I think the description is basically that there's music after the wedding. Justin, Vernon's plane, you brought Bruce Hornsby and Nick and Amelia from Sylvan so we're about to start, they're set and the chef of mothers and sons is like making carbonara in a corner. I think my heart would have exploded in that moment that is actually in my heaven. It's an amazing community of I mean, you have people who are making amazing food people who are making amazing music, you know, together and clearly close knit. What's that like?

Brad Cook  53:33
Well, for starters, I will say that the chefs here are like my number one inspo I'm so eternally grateful, inspired by the food pulls my favorite restaurant in the world. I've there's not even a close second, just from pure amount of like, time I've put in there. I love every one of Ashley's restaurants. I go to Matt's restaurants mother and sons venues. Yeah, St. James St. James just reopened. Yeah. St. James's like is so exciting to me and I you know, but I there's a lot of there's a lot you know, go to lean is one of my favorite places to eat in this town. I go to stone my wife and I, our favorite place to go when we get back into town is the Dashi Bar upstairs. It's amazing. It's just like, somehow that's the place we always come back and like recalibrate.

Matt Perault  54:19
I was there on Wednesday because they do the break even Wednesday's thing where they like, have a nice bottle of whiskey that you can get one ounce of at cost. So I got a great whiskey for like, three dollars

Brad Cook  54:29
Yeah, yeah, there's just like, and I think they're all taking risks in ways that like, again, you know, back to bias reinforcement, looking at music all the time is not exciting to me. I love music so much and I listen to so much music that I'm excited by but I don't ever look to other artists when I'm making records and I don't I don't like to think about it in that way. I think about food and I think about building a house and I think basketball I think about I watched basketball you know, these are the ways that I just sort of unpacked my mind to what I'm doing that aren't being influenced by our own field, you know, and so I tell you I like Ashley's wedding was it was the most fun I've ever had at a wedding. What was special about that for all of us was like, we had so we had a wedding band. The way we did it was, you know, Bruce has a surprise Ashley's. He's like her favorite artist. And so I've produced part of his last record and his next record that'll come out later this year. So we've had like a working relationship, and he and Justin as well. But we got Bruce to come and then we put together a wedding band and it was myself and my brother Nick and Amelia Justin, and then the drummer of Bon Iver Matt makaan, who is two houses down across the street on this call the sack, okay. That's why we live here to Matt, Matt and Sarah are like our best friends. But we learned a bunch of covers like Foreigner and a bunch of songs. And we just played we got to, we're all working so much. You know, Nick, and I have been friends for 20 years. I met him right after I met everybody else. When he was in Milwaukee. He is a college freshman and those kind of relationships so like for all of us to be together and like we rehearsed in my backyard on the deck, you know, we all got together when night we didn't even plug in our shit. We just sat out there, talked and drank beer and like, sang and played songs all night was so special for us as musicians because it was just it was for nobody I mean, between Nick and million Justin there, they can sell a lot of tickets. And it was really special to all just be like, enjoying each other's just this simple, like cooking a meal together for all the chefs, you know, whatever that is. So then the next day, I think that carried over and it was the whole thing was just like they had Mike Lee from em sushi making these crazy roll. I mean, it was the most insane party I've ever been to, you know, but it was so fun. So cool.

Matt Perault 56:47
You said, right before we started, you talked about yourself as an introvert but you work in this profession that seems incredibly extroverted. What's that like for you?

Brad Cook 56:56
It's funny, you know, we were joking about earlier is it we're really mad NFS it It took me 10 years to figure out that touring wasn't part of that.

Matt Perault 57:04
And like because touring feels like it's it requires extraversion?

Brad Cook 57:08
Yeah, yeah, you're standing on a stage and you're like, if you're doing it right, and this is something I'll say is I wasn't a great performer. I was like, sometimes I was if all the variables stacked up, sure, but it wasn't like, the thing that drove me. And I would use my brother as an example. It's it's not all that drives him but he's just so good. He's like his match fit is anybody
I've ever seen that can walk on stage. He's gonna look everyone in the crowd in the eye and he's gonna play his ass off. No matter what Mandy's in no matter what show it is. He's as good as a show business. Has anyone ever? We just didn't have you know, we are always making records when we were kids. That was we Justin's parents bought us a Pro Tools rig when we were 16, 17 years old, whatever it was, and, you know, we had it set up in our house and we would tinker around and make the songs and do stuff. So that said, we never had an Anyone in the town we were growing up in, that did music for a living. So we didn't have anywhere to go. And we kind of were answering, finding all these having all these questions, we had no one to turn to. When we got here, that became a bit easier. But I never had anybody stop me until probably a few years ago and be like, you ever think about not touring. Like maybe that's not the best use of your time. And it was like, duh, it was like a big aha moment. You know, like, Yeah, I don't want to do this anymore. And I dabbled in management for a little while just because, you know, it's fun to help people. But I've learned that I can do all that just through production, you know, and, and really be able to maintain like, these relationships with the people I work with that are Yeah, they are intimate and strong and special, you know, and they're not very public all the time. There's there's probably mystery to what what we're doing in here, but it's really just like this. We're just trying to catch a vibe together.

Yeah. Do it right.

Matt Perault  59:01
Brad Cook, producer, thank you for joining us on the podcast.

Brad Cook  59:03
Thanks for having me.