

EPISODE 161**[INTRODUCTION]**

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[0:01:02] LW: Hello friends, and welcome back to the Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary people, just like you and me, who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified as their mission. In doing so, they've been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who've either heard about their story, or who've witnessed them in action, or people who've directly benefited from their work.

This week on the show, I'm in conversation with somebody whose work and dedication to their work I've admired from afar for a few years now. But first, a little backstory. For a long time, I've been a huge fan of Kanye West. More so, I'm a fan of his music and his overall creative expression. I don't know a whole lot about his personal life, or his mental health, or his politics, but I've always appreciated his consistency of high-quality storytelling albums and his willingness to take creative risks, and his influence on other artists.

As a fellow content creator, Kanye's output has been nothing short of remarkable. But, like a lot of people, I didn't know much about the backstory of Kanye's production. I just appreciated his

music. Then years ago, I stumbled upon this podcast called Dissect. The host of the podcast was on a mission to take popular albums and break down the elements that made up the individual songs that led to the critically acclaimed albums. The host's name is Cole Cuchna. Cole, who was married with a young child at the time that he started this endeavor, spent hundreds of hours in his off-time dissecting Kendrick Lamar's, *To Pimp a Butterfly* album in his garage and in his closet after his wife and young child would go to bed at night.

Cole had been an aspiring musician for many, many years, forming bands with friends, touring in vans, sleeping on floors, and getting by on cheap junk food. Then he decided to go back to school to formally study music composition, which he never knew how to read music. After school, he got a job at a coffee shop and he found himself at night sitting at home, wasting time scrolling through social media. I'm sure we can all relate to that. After having dissected hundreds of classical arrangements in school, when Cole first heard Kendrick Lamar's, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he wondered, "Hmm. Why not take that same long-form analytical approach *To Pimp a Butterfly* that I used to take to all those classical songs?" He used that as inspiration to begin the podcast Dissect.

Then after creating the season of *Pimp a Butterfly*, he dissected Kanye West's critically acclaimed *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Then the next season, he dissected Frank Ocean's *Blonde*, as well as albums by Tyler, the Creator, Mac Miller, Beyonce, and more. When I first heard these episodes, I was completely blown away by the attention to detail and the story that he uncovered behind the songs of those popular artists because Cole didn't just discuss the musical arrangements, but he also talked about the history, the culture, the philosophy and the storytelling of the musicians and of the times in which those songs were created.

Eventually, Cole was offered an exclusive deal by Spotify for his excellent analysis on Dissect, and he was finally able to quit his job at the coffee shop and devote himself full-time to that work that lit him up inside and that he was sharing with the world. I just love stories like Cole's, because I feel that it's more relatable of a backstory than a lot of the more famous guests that I typically have on the podcast because it's just proof that you don't have to make a choice between following your passion and paying the bills. If you're willing to be creative enough and persistent enough, you can do both.

It may not happen as quickly as you wanted it to happen, but it will absolutely happen if you continue pouring your passion and your heart, and your love into the things that you want to share with the world. Something that I heard Cole say on one of his episodes, when he talked a little bit about his backstory, was that the world gives you nothing until you give it everything. In this conversation, Cole shares with me how he gave the world everything.

I think you're really going to love this episode, and you're going to be inspired to take that next step along your path. Without further ado, I introduce you to Mr. Cole Cuchna, the creator of Dissect.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:06:17] LW: Cole Cuchna. Thank you so much for joining my podcast, man. I'm so, so excited to hear your backstory and unpack all of the different moments that led you to where you are right now.

[0:06:29] CC: Yeah. Thanks for having me. Should be fun.

[0:06:33] LW: All right. You're from Sacramento. You grow up in Sacramento?

[0:06:35] CC: Yeah. Suburb, like 10 minutes outside of central Sacramento called Elk Grove.

[0:06:42] LW: When you think back to young Cole, little Cole, like seven, eight-years-old, that kind of thing. Thinking back to your favorite toys, or activities as a child, what would you say that was?

[0:06:56] CC: First thing I thought about was basketball. As a kid, I loved basketball. I love playing it. I love watching it. That's stuck with me my whole life. But I also love to draw. That was definitely, I think, my first — in terms of me becoming somewhat of a creative. I think the early drawing was the first flowering of that. Shortly, I don't know, maybe about a little after I started drawing is when I found music. Mostly listening to music for years. But I would say, those are the three things that shaped my life early on with probably drawing being the central creative outlet and music coming a little later.

[0:07:35] LW: Were you a natural artist?

[0:07:37] CC: Comparatively to most people, I would say, probably, yes. I tend to compare myself to people that are really good at whatever I'm comparing to. In that respect, no. I'm a shitty drawer. But maybe compared to a non-artist, I was naturally gifted, I would say. That would continue for most of my life. I would say, anything creative, I found a way to do pretty well.

[0:08:03] LW: While you were drawing, your dad was always playing music in the background. What was he playing?

[0:08:09] CC: Yeah, when I was young, it was definitely more white people's rock music.

[0:08:16] LW: Like Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen.

[0:08:18] CC: No, actually, it's more like U2 and Pink Floyd a little bit, and The Beatles was the one I remember. I don't know if that's because he played it more if that's just the one that resonated the most, but I just definitely remember hearing The Beatles really loud on the weekends when he was cleaning the house. It was like, sticks at one of my earliest memories is The Beatles just – it was blaring. It was really loud. It's a very vivid – I have a horrible memory, but those memories really stick with me.

[0:08:48] LW: Were you the type, who could hear a song once or twice and know all the lyrics, or were you the type that you could hear something a thousand times and still you wouldn't know the lyrics? You just know the melody.

[0:08:57] CC: It's funny; it's the melody. Even to this day, even though I spend so much of my time analyzing lyrics now, it's still not the first thing that I listen to when I listen to music. It's always the melody, production, the rhythm, and everything, but the lyrics are what I naturally gravitate towards. Yeah, even from day one, it's always – it was always the music that drew me.

I remember vividly guitar solos, which is what led me to really fall in love with Jimi Hendrix. Was not the song. Was just the guitar playing was so out there and just captured me so well, to the

point that I was inspired to start playing guitar, because of Jimi Hendrix. But it was the guitar solo that attracted me, not Purple Haze, what he was saying.

[0:09:40] LW: You mentioned seeing a photo of him kneeling over a guitar on fire. Where did you see this photo? What was that circumstance?

[0:09:46] CC: I can't really remember. I used to check out these VHS tapes when you can go to a blockbuster, whatever. We had a local video store by my house and I would go there every weekend and I get to check out one, or two tapes every weekend. I'd always pick, it was either skateboarding or music. I want to say, it was some kind of documentary. It might have been Woodstock. I think it might have been Woodstock, a documentary. Some kind of documentary that featured Jimi Hendrix and it showed him and all the various ways he destroyed his guitar.

As a 10, 12-year-old kid, I was just like, "Oh, that's the coolest thing I've ever seen." You know what I mean? It's the old over the guitar, like summoning the spirits as smoke is coming out of his red electric guitar. Just thought it was the coolest thing, as a kid would.

[0:10:32] LW: I'm not sure what your dad did for a living, but what was the philosophy, or ideology that you remember your dad or your parents echoing to you as a child in terms of making it in the world? Did you have to work hard, or be creative, or it's about who you know? What were they talking about?

[0:10:48] CC: Out of all those, it was definitely always hard work. My parents aren't creative. My mom's crafty, but I wouldn't say she's artistic. My dad, he loves music but doesn't have a creative artistic bone in his body. No offense. He's created other things. It was always an anomaly in that way, but both my mom and dad are extremely hard workers. My sister became an extremely hard worker. I would say, I'm an extremely hard worker. That was something they always ingrained in me.

The fight that I had with them, though, constantly for a long time, they didn't quite understand my creativity. When I started to spend more and more of my time doing creative things and then I decided that I wanted to do creative things for a living — is when the parent side of them, and now as a parent, I get it. The parent side of them started to push me, or at least try to make me

think about that as a hobby and less as a career path, which practically, logistically is the right advice, or could be the right advice.

In retrospect, I'm glad they were pushing me that way because I always had backup plans, but it never weakened my resolve in what I thought I should be doing with my life. The fact that I didn't listen and was so persistent, despite them telling me, "You need to be doing something else, or at least have a backup plan," validated my own passion, I guess, my determination in doing it. Because I would have every excuse not to do it, that would become, as I got older and was still working non-creative jobs to earn money, but yet, having these creative outlets on the side that I still was pursuing as something I wanted to do for a living, yeah, I don't know. It just somehow made me more resolute in my determination, if that makes sense.

It's contradictory, but I look back and be like, oh, it was actually important that they were pushing me against it, so I can validate my own passion in terms of like, yeah, why did I push against it so hard for so long? Well, maybe because I was like, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.

[0:12:56] LW: Well, at the same time, there are people who work hard at their passions and then they mail it in in school. That was my case. There are people who work really hard in school, and they just devote all their time to that, and they use their passions as a hobby or an outlet to release the pressures. I'm wondering where you fell in terms of – because you would spend hours on end skateboarding and obsessed with the guitar for years and years. Did that translate to your school work, that hard work ethic?

[0:13:25] CC: In high school, definitely not. I was just getting through high school. For whatever reason, I mean, I love education now. But in high school, I was not. Looking back, it's hard for me to know if I was just too young and immature to – or if I just had impassionate teachers, which is definitely a thing. For whatever reason, I didn't get into education until later. But once I fell in love with education in college, I worked really, really hard. Got really good grades, and all that.

I found that anything that I've come to like, I usually – well, I always work really, really hard at it. It's really hard for me to fake that, though. If I don't care, I won't work hard. That's just the reality of it. Even though, maybe sometimes, I should. But that's another thing where the longer you

live, you realize you will tell yourself exactly what you need sometimes. If you're intuitively not inspired by something and you aren't working as hard as you know you should, there's probably a reason for that, right? It's probably a sign that you might want to think about doing something else. The older I got, the more I was willing to let that start to dictate what I spent my time with.

[0:14:41] LW: Did the pushback start when you dropped out of college, that initial time you dropped out of undergrad to be in the band and all of that?

[0:14:50] CC: Yeah. I was simultaneously going to college for, I would say, probably three years. I was just going to college. I was just taking creative electives. I was taking all the art classes, all the philosophy classes, all the literature classes, film, music, or not so much music, ironically. I was just going because I wanted to go. I was just going to community college. Then yeah, I was also in a band at the same time, and those things just – I loved the band, and I loved school, but I also knew I couldn't be dividing my time in that way if I wanted to be successful at either one.

I made the decision to drop out and pursue the band that I was in at the time. For me, that was, and came to realize, this wasn't everyone else, but for me dropping out of college and pursuing the band was a real thing. It wasn't like an excuse, I'm going to be in a band, and now it'll justify how I leave this lazy existence, which a lot of band people tend to do. For me, it was like, I need to write music six to eight hours a day. That's how I'm going to succeed is if I just spent all my time actually pursuing music, which meant practicing with the band three to four times a week, but also me, I would literally wake up and write music eight hours a day, 10 hours a day sometimes.

It was a very serious commitment. Yeah, that was when I had a heart-to-heart with my parents in terms of just like, they were pushing. I wrote them this letter. Told them why I was dropping out of college. The way that I wrote the letter, a conversation we had after it, they had never since that day pushed me to try to do anything else. I think at that point, I was 24 or something, 25. They're like, okay. I think they're just like, they got it. They're like, "Okay, we've fought this long, and he's still doing it." I think they recognized I'd figure some things out for myself.

[0:16:44] LW: You say write music six, eight hours a day. For someone who doesn't read music, how do you – you mean you were songwriting, or how would you write? What was your process like? Were you humming, or playing, recording yourself?

[0:16:56] CC: No. That was the time that I had got my first laptop and actually had a chance to compose music on pro tools, or a logic pro, music, new music program for your computer, where I can record myself playing piano, then I can write a bass line to it, I could write drums to it, and produce entire songs that I would then take to my band and hand out the parts to my band members.

Essentially, what I learned or what I was doing was doing what a composer does for an orchestra, or whatever it is, where they write all the parts and then distribute those parts among the players, which would pay off when I actually went back to college. But, yeah. That time, it was literally just me at the computer, or the piano, just composing songs that I would then take to my band to play.

[0:17:42] LW: Were you still reading Nietzsche and Sculpin Hauer and studying history and all that at the same time, or not really?

[0:17:49] CC: Yeah. At that point, I had a lot of time. I was just working a restaurant busser job. I think my rent was \$300 a month because I was staying in this, essentially, the back of someone's house and the tiniest –

[0:18:02] LW: Under the stairs.

[0:18:03] CC: Oh, yeah. That was part of it. That was one of them, for sure. That was a \$150 rent. I just lived in these remote places, so that I only had to work two or three days a week, and then the rest of the time, I would be able to create music.

[0:18:17] LW: What was your motivation at the time? Where did you see yourself going, and what was this payoff during that period of time in your mind?

[0:18:26] CC: I mean, at that moment, it was like, I want to make it in a band. That was the expectation. That was what I working towards was like; this band, it's going to be successful. This was with the advent of social media. We were putting songs on MySpace just to give the era where we're working there. Facebook was not quite a thing yet. MySpace was the big thing. At that time, record labels were still the way to do that, so it was like, we wanted to be signed, so we were writing albums. Writing, recording albums, and playing shows every weekend, and the goal was to make it in a band, which ended up not being the goal after a couple of years of trying. I did some other stuff, but at that moment, it was, I want to make it in this band.

[0:19:12] LW: What was your understanding of why bands fail and why they succeed at that time in your life? What did you think you had to do? What needed to happen in order for you to make it?

[0:19:22] CC: The hard part about being in a band is everyone thinks a little bit differently, have different motives. There can be a disconnect in the way that you get successful. For me, it was work our ass off as much as we can, practice, become the best musicians possible, grind and do it that way. For others, it became a little bit more about the lifestyle that comes with being in a band and the perks and stuff. I felt like, after a while, I was the one working the hardest and maybe exponentially harder than everyone else.

But yeah, I mean, my idea was, yeah, you just write the best songs possible, and the only way to write the best songs possible is to write as many as you can and practice as much as you can. Just be a good band. If you're a good band, success will come, and not the opposite.

[0:20:11] LW: When you're writing your songs, you obviously have a formula, right? You have an idea what a good song would sound like or would be like. What were the elements of that good song in your mind?

[0:20:22] CC: I mean, for that project, and it does have some parallels with what I ended up doing with Dissect. It was like there had to be an underlying meaning. There had to be a message behind the lyrics. But the music in my – for me personally, the music had to be interesting. There had to be some creative thing I could point to and be like, “That's a little bit different.” That's a little bit innovative that that moment, or that chord, or that whatever. That's

usually how I found what ideas I wanted to pursue versus ones, I just tossed aside and was like, is there anything interesting, or out of the norm in this chord progression, or drum beat, or whatever?

There had to be meaning. There had to be innovation. But then the strategist in me is like, it also has to be catchy. There has to be some mass appeal. Doesn't have to be a pop Britney Spears hit, but it's like, there's got to be something others are going to enjoy as well. In the back of my mind, it is like, I always knew to be successful at music and actually have a career at it, it's like, yeah, you have to appeal to a lot of people. If you make experimental music that narrows your path in terms of getting far, in terms of a career in music. I always try to balance between being creative and innovative but also still appealing broadly to an audience.

[0:21:52] LW: Around 26, 27, you decided to quit. Was there a straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak?

[0:21:59] CC: Yeah, I think so. We didn't tour a bunch, but we did these weekend trips, where we tried to book a few shows out of town and hit it Friday, Saturday, Sunday, or whatever the case may be. We went on one particular trip to San Diego. Yeah, all three of my band members just got fucking trashed afterward. Just wasted. We were sleeping on someone's floor, and I just remember being the only sober one there. I would drink occasionally, but I would never get belligerent or anything like that. I always just felt like a babysitter.

I was sleeping on the floor. We've probably eaten whatever shit fast food that night. I was just like, "Nope. This ain't it." I can't handle a few, even a couple more years of this. That was definitely the moment I was just – I love those guys. Still love them and still talk to them and everything like that, but it was just like, with me working harder than everyone else, paired with the lifestyle of essentially making no money and living in closets and all these things that I look back and think like, oh, those are sacrifices that I was making to pursue this larger goal. It just became for me like, I got continually worried about relying on other people for my own success, which is a double-edged sword in terms of, like, you do need other people in pretty much anything that you do to be successful.

But when you're so reliant on them, in particular, being in a band or anything creative, it became — whereas, like, as business partners. Would these be my business partners? Like, no way in hell. That combined with me wanting to go back to school and keep getting better at music and studying music formally. I think I'd gotten married right around that time, too. It was a culmination of things that came like, yeah, the band thing is probably not for me anymore.

[0:23:50] LW: You were also probably pretending with your parents like everything was fine, right? They go, “How are you doing, Cole?” “Oh, everything is great. We’re eating Taco Bell and sleeping on the floor and are making no money.” Everything they said was going to happen. It ended up happening.

[0:24:03] CC: Yeah. Right. They were really supportive. They would come to my shows, everything like that. Ironically, I'd still look back at that band and think, yeah, if we would have kept going, we probably would have done something. The band was good. The blast show we played was the biggest show we had, and we played with a nationally touring act, which made it well. I wouldn't say it made it more difficult to leave. I was ready to leave no matter what. But it wasn't like, I was leaving nothing. I do feel we had the potential to do something, whether that was a sustaining career or not. I do believe we could have gone somewhere with it. But life happened, and I moved on.

[0:24:41] LW: You end up going to Cal State Sacramento but sounds like you were broke, so I don't know how you ended up paying for that. You said you faked your way into the music program. What exactly does that mean?

[0:24:52] CC: At that point, I'd played music for over, I'd say, almost 15 years-ish. But I was self-taught. I think I took one or two lessons when I was — part of me getting a guitar for my 13th birthday was it, I had to take lessons, and that lasted a couple of weeks, and I was like, I just wanted to be Jimi Hendrix and my guitar teacher was a flamenco guitar player. That's not what I'm doing here. I was a bit self-taught. I had seen notes. I know what music notes were, but I didn't know how to read them.

As I started to think about like, how am I going to progress as a musician, I felt like I had maxed out on my own self-knowledge. I knew some theory. I didn't really know how to read music. I

couldn't sit down at a piano and just play a piece reading it. I was like, yeah, I need formal education. In preparation for thinking about going to college, I started to look at, "Oh, hey. How do I read music a little bit better?"

You have to audition to get into the composition program at most colleges. You have to audition, but as a composer, you can't really audition, so you audition as a performer first, and then you end up majoring in composition, but you also have to play an instrument. I played piano. I tried out — my audition was a piece that I wrote, which masked the fact that I didn't really know how to read music. I got into the program on a piece that I wrote and then realized very shortly after that I was just totally, totally out of my depth.

The experience of knowing how far I was behind because when you don't know, you don't know. You don't know what you don't know. There's this whole other world of, like, I realized all these musicians that I'm suddenly in school with, and classes with have been playing music formally since junior high when they started playing saxophone and then took lessons and was in a band through high school. I had just no experience whatsoever, with any of it. Yeah, me sneaking my way into the program, getting in, and realizing what the program actually was, was an entirely different thing that I can tell you some horror stories about. But that's how I got in was like playing a composition that I wrote myself that — so masked me, not knowing how to read music.

[0:27:19] LW: There was no reading music 101 class because everyone should have already been reading music by the time you get there.

[0:27:25] CC: The lowest music theory course was advanced — it's an advanced course. It's not like, here's the note A, and here's like — you know what I mean? It's like, it's not that at all. I was starting at zero pretty much, and everyone else was at 1.7 or whatever.

[0:27:42] LW: Let me ask you this. If you don't know how to play music by ear, let's say, like I don't know how to play. I can't read music. I've never really played an instrument seriously. Would you and I be at the same level? Or the fact that you could actually play instruments, would you find that a little bit less challenging to go to a music school where everyone already knows everything?

[0:28:03] CC: Yeah. I mean, I was a good piano player, and I was a good guitar player, and you learn – I mean, it's like – it's not like I was totally naïve like I didn't know what chords were, or some music theory. You know what I mean? You could just pick that up by learning other people's songs and be like, “Oh, I see why this works, and I see why this –” You know what I mean? I did know some things. I don't want to be totally like I was just like –

[0:28:25] LW: Yeah, of course.

[0:28:27] CC: In terms of, like, that's way different than formal training, where you're learning physical techniques, not only how to play your instrument, but also sight reading. That was the biggest hindrance for me; it was just seeing the notes that are on the page and then playing them on the piano was, it was like being where everyone else was fluent in a language; I was not fluent in a language. Or I was looking at the dictionary to find the word for whatever Spanish word you're trying to say; that was me. Looking at the note on the page and then finding on my keyboard was just not – there's a huge disconnect there.

[0:29:02] LW: Yeah, I was just thinking that because I'm learning Spanish right now, and I'm translating three times in my head. I hear it, I translate it to English, and then I think about the Spanish response. Then I have to translate it from English to Spanish response and then speak it all within half a second. It's like, you just, “Aah.”

[0:29:19] CC: Yeah, exactly. That was exactly me at the piano trying to read music.

[0:29:24] LW: What was the tuition situation?

[0:29:25] CC: I took out student loans. Pretty much that, and then me and my wife moved in with her mom. My wife went to nursing school while I was going to music school, so we didn't have rent to pay, which was a huge blessing. I didn't have to work for the majority of the time I was in college.

[0:29:43] LW: Still humbling, though, right? Moving into your wife's mom's place in your 20s.

[0:29:48] CC: Definitely. I was pretty determined that what I was doing was the right decision. I didn't feel like I made a mistake.

[0:29:57] LW: Was this feeling you're describing now? It sounds like, you knew that this was your path. Was that the first time you felt that in your life, or had you felt that before and it was like a familiarity when you felt it again, and that made you work harder and take those extra classes to learn how to read music and stuff like that?

[0:30:19] CC: Yeah. I think everything that I've ever decided to do felt like the right thing in the moment. I tried to execute that thing as if that were the truth. You know what I mean? When I was in a band, that felt right and that's why I pursued it at that time. I think, as everyone knows, as you get older, just life evolves, things change and motives change and all that, and you have to be adaptive while still staying true to that feeling. The feeling that I was getting with the band was like, this is not right for me now.

The feeling that I got with, in theory, pursuing music formally was feeling like that's what I wanted to do, and it felt right when I did, even though it was extremely challenging and I almost dropped out because of all the factors of me being so underdeveloped. Still, I didn't drop out. It still felt like this is what I need to be doing. Once I committed to that, it was like, I'm going to do everything that I can to be successful.

You alluded to the way that I was able to make up my education that I was lacking was I would take the 18 units required as a music major. Then on the side, I found these, what are called the great courses, which they still have them, but they're essentially college-level courses that you could take. You didn't get credits for them or anything, but they are college-level courses taught by renowned professors from across the country. I found this really great professor, Dr. Greenberg, who had all these courses on music. I bootlegged all of the courses, downloaded them, and just took all the courses that were offered.

It was all for non-musicians. A lot of them were non-musicians, so it was the perfect level for me because all the theory stuff was explained in a way that my mom could understand. It was meant to be accessible to non-musicians. For my position, it was great because it wasn't technical, and the technical parts were explained in a way that everyone could understand. I

was taking all those courses on the side while I was taking the actual courses at college. I did that for about two years. By the second or third year, I felt comparable.

I wasn't excelling as a musician. I started to excel at the education part of it. I started to excel at essay writing about music, and I started to excel at some of the theoretical stuff. I never became what I would feel comfortable comparing myself to the pianist that I was playing alongside during college. Those people were on a whole other level, musicianship-wise in terms of playing their instrument. I never got to that level. But I really started to excel in the more academic part of music, which would eventually lead me to do Dissect.

[0:33:03] LW: This is also the first time you were dissecting songs and getting context based on people's personal lives and the time they wrote this piece, and the place where they played the piece. You do a great job of breaking all this down in your TED Talk. But for the listener who hasn't seen your TED Talk, can you just give us an idea of what that would look like in a typical song, or a Beethoven song, or something that you guys would study?

[0:33:28] CC: Yeah. You would just, like any class of any subject; you have these open prompts of writing essays and music. It could be a Beethoven piece. I remember I wrote a piece on Dimitri Shostakovich, one of my favorite composers. Yeah, if you wrote a piece about whatever, pick a piece, you'd have to research. You can analyze just the music, but what I discovered through college was like, you would learn so much about the music by learning about the composer and the time that the composer was living in, what was happening during that time, where they were living, the things that were going on in their environment, personal life. Researching all that ended up paying dividends in the analysis of the composition, and you can really give the context of a piece through the context of the artist's life and the time they're living.

I really started to love that process. I was always the person that began the essay the moment that they were assigned it. I wasn't procrastinating, like I realized a lot of the people I was going to school with would procrastinate, and I'd be halfway down with mine, and they hadn't even started. I remember thinking back and being like, or just realizing in the moment that I was a little bit unique in that way, and I'm really doing this thing that other people didn't seem to love so much.

I thought it made me a better musician than a better composer because I learned how to incorporate things larger than myself into the compositions by studying how other composers did that. Yeah, I also learned how art could be a reflection of culture and society, where it's like, you can learn something about more than the composition through the composition. You can learn about Dmitri Shostakovich, who was composing under Stalin's rule. I learned so much about USSR, Russia, and all that through the compositions of Shostakovich because he was living during that time and he was having interactions with Stalin and all this stuff.

I just really loved how the composition can be a wormhole into history, and what you can learn about society, history, but also just what it means to be human. I mean, that's really the underlying foundation of all art is translating human experience into something creative. What I'm always trying to get at, what I learn to get at was like, what are the human truths in this great piece of art, which is one reason why art stands the test of time, I believe, is that because they have the truth in them.

I really just got addicted to that uncovering process because I just felt like I was learning so much just personally about myself through these artworks that were composed 200 years ago. It was like, that's weird. But then it was like, why? Well, we're human, and we're all human. It's just sharing different human experiences that have these underlying universal principles to them. I just really loved that about analyzing music.

[0:36:27] LW: I heard the movie producer, Brian Grazer. I think Ari Emanuel, the head of WME, talked about this, too, about how they had dyslexia. Obviously, no kid wants to be trying to read with dyslexia because you can't read, so they had to come up with workarounds, which helped them become, basically, hustlers. Like, learn how to make things happen through association, or through networking, or whatever, which then serve them really well in their careers. I used to teach yoga, and I joke that I was the stiffest yoga teacher — I could barely touch my toes. But it turned out to be a unique advantage because it allowed me to really hone in on articulation and not rely on demonstration. I'm wondering, in your case, not being able to read music initially and then having to go and study extra, looking back now, was that in some way a unique advantage for you as well?

[0:37:22] CC: Yeah, I think so. Maybe at the time, it didn't feel like that.

[0:37:26] LW: No, of course not.

[0:37:28] CC: Yeah, just because insecurities and stress and all that.

[0:37:32] LW: You were also older, too. You mentioned that you would be excited about these essays. I'm sure that kids who were 19 and 20 were like, "Yeah, whatever. I got to go party first." But you were very focused. You were married. You're serious.

[0:37:43] CC: That was definitely part of me, working hard. I felt like I did outwork most people. But yeah, I think that had to do with me being older, and putting myself on the line to do this definitely forced me. Yeah, it's an interesting question in terms of your deficiencies being an advantage. I definitely think that they can. I think in my experience, yeah, I'm just trying to think of it exactly how that manifested itself because I do think it played a part. It might just be me overcompensating. That could be one component of it.

I'm deficient in these things, so I'm going to overcome – in the things that I can thrive in, I'm going to really thrive in, which I think was a big part of it. Because I wasn't thriving so much in the musician – the actual playing of the instruments. I was just at too many years of a disadvantage there, where it felt almost hopeless to try to catch up in that way. Yeah, I think part of me really excelling in the academic side of things was, yeah, that was an area that I felt my deficiencies weren't a problem. I loved it. I genuinely fell in love with it. I do think that definitely had some motivation there.

I mean, generally, when we find success in something, it feels good, right? We're naturally incentivized to keep pursuing it, and definitely think that was part of me excelling in the academic portion for sure.

[0:39:03] LW: But those essays, you would get high marks on, even though you're playing catch up in the rest of the curriculum.

[0:39:08] CC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The teachers would make it a point to be like, “This is really good.” I had a few of those where they took the time to be like, “You’re doing above and beyond the –”

[0:39:19] LW: Exceptional.

[0:39:20] CC: Yeah, yeah. Even before, when I was not going to music, the first time I went to college, that was always the case, too, with different subjects and stuff. The essay writing was always something that I ended up just excelling at for whatever reason. My professors always noted that you’re pretty good at this.

[0:39:39] LW: Okay, so you graduate in 2015. Going to go be a maestro somewhere, or what was the plan, man? You just work your ass off getting this music degree and you end up at a coffee shop.

[0:39:52] CC: Yeah. That’s, yeah, exactly what happened. It was a debate between continuing school, which was a master’s, and a Ph.D. was really the only track as a music major. If you’re not playing in – you’re not an active player, and even there, it’s really tough. I was not good enough at my instrument to be a professional player. Now it’s getting pretty good at composing. What we didn’t talk about so much was that I was a composition major, so I was writing pieces. I was learning how to write pieces for orchestra, for different ensembles, and was really, really like that, although I wasn’t as good as I was at essay writing. The academic stuff was always the strongest. After I graduated, it was done — I want to go back to school for probably six more years, maybe five. At that point, I was what? 28 or however old I was. It’s somewhat daunting to commit –

[0:40:48] LW: How about getting the band back together? I mean, you’re a better songwriter now, right? You studied composition.

[0:40:54] CC: Yeah. That could have been an option. Even to this day, I’m not interested at all in that. It’s hard. I mean, I did that for – I started my first band I was in high school, and then I was have ever since. I’d done that for over 10 years at that point. I maxed myself out, I think. Relying on other people is always scary, to be honest. Going back to that was scary because yeah, it

was debate. I got a job at a coffee shop to just buy time, to be honest but then ended up falling in love with coffee. That sent me on a whole other wormhole of education and experience.

[0:41:31] LW: Is it nepotism? You saw an ad on Craigslist. How did you get this job at a coffee shop?

[0:41:35] CC: Well, I fell in love with coffee in college. I'd go to coffee shops to write or do whatever and really fell in love with coffee as a consumer and really geeked out on, at that point, what I could in terms of self-education. I was buying beans and studying the flavors, and then I started reading about the history of coffee. Anything that I like, I ended up just obsessing on for a while. Then I was like, "Oh, I'll just get a job at this coffee shop that I've been going to, that I really respected and was doing really well locally."

[0:42:07] LW: I've been to Temple before.

[0:42:10] CC: Oh, cool.

[0:42:10] LW: Yeah. My dad lives in Sacramento.

[0:42:12] CC: Oh, cool.

[0:42:13] LW: I would go visit. I've visited him a few times and looking for a place to write or whatever. I found myself in Temple one day.

[0:42:20] CC: Oh, cool. Yeah, yeah. I worked for them for five years. I ended up just not going back to college. It just felt too daunting at that point.

[0:42:29] LW: It sounds like you had a pretty decent job there, and you're doing all these interesting things, teaching coffee classes, etc. But in the back of your mind, did it feel like you were settling, or did you feel like you were just incubating until the next thing presented itself that felt the same way going to – music school felt?

[0:42:47] CC: I genuinely fell in love with coffee, and I resigned myself to thinking that it could be a career path that I would be satisfied with. At that time, it felt like that. I think looking back, it probably would have run its course. I think I would have probably maxed out with that if I did it too long. When I got out of college, I had a job at a coffee shop, and then I was making music still. I released, self-released an album that I did all my own. Produced, mixed, mastered. Everything from start to finish was me.

It was electronic music combined with classical music was the idea. I was trying to fuse those two elements together. Not dance electronic, but more like ambient electronic, with some hip-hop influence, drums, and stuff. That was mostly me. I wasn't trying to make it. I never played a show, but it was just my creative outlet at the time and that kind of ended. I was still making music, but I was doing it less. I just had a kid. I was about to have a kid. There definitely was a feeling that something was missing. That I always had creative opportunities with the job that I had, but they were limited. I wasn't making music as much, and that, yeah, definitely, there's a little bit of time there where it felt like, yeah, something was missing. I really missed writing is what I came to miss about college. The most, actually, was that I missed writing essays. If you want to get into Dissect, that's where it started.

[0:44:23] LW: You also came across the Serial Podcast. That was the first episodic podcast a lot – myself included. A lot of us came across, and it got us creative types thinking about, “Hmm. Maybe I could do something like this.”

[0:44:40] LW: I mean, that first season of Serial is a landmark in podcast history, to say the least. Probably the most important podcast season ever at this point, I think. Because it was a watershed moment for the format, and a lot of people discovered podcasts through that season of Serial. It was really well done. The limitations of audio storytelling, or the perceived limitations of storytelling through audio, I think, they broke a lot of ground there and really proved that you can create captivating, serialized long-form content with just audio. It was super compelling, just as compelling as watching a TV show.

Just like a lot of people, I fell in love not only with that show but also the possibilities of the format and me, anything that I take a liking to, I'm always like, “What if I did that? What would

my version of that be?" I just can't help myself, anything that I end up liking creatively, like I can't help us start to formulate what my version of that thing be.

[0:45:39] LW: You had a problem. You didn't like the sound of your voice.

[0:45:42] CC: Oh, yeah. Still don't. I mean, I didn't.

[0:45:46] LW: How were you going to navigate that with a podcast?

[0:45:49] CC: I mean, that was definitely one of the initial mental hurdles. I think anyone that's tried podcasts, it's a big mind fuck. Having to hear your voice over and over. Anyone that doesn't do it often will hear their voice on video, or whatever, and be like, "That's what I sound like?" Everyone has that experience. Imagine cutting hours of audio to make a show. It's like an existential crisis.

[0:46:15] LW: Word on the street is you didn't think about it very much. You just started putting it together. I guess you wrote your first episode and went into your closet, recorded it. Is that how it went down?

[0:46:25] CC: Yeah, pretty much. I mean, the story I always tell is, I think, it's important because you just never know how things come together in a way that you just would never predict because Dissect ends up representing everything that I've ever done in my life into one thing. If you told me five years before I started the podcast like, you would be a successful podcaster one day. I'd probably say, "What's podcasting, for one?" Even if I knew what podcasting was, I'd be like, how is that ever possible? I can't even imagine what that looks like.

A couple of things all happened at once. To try to briefly explain, the biggest thing was I was having my first child. That obviously changes your life more than anything. But I just remember one of, like I said, I have a terrible memory, but one of my most vivid memories is bringing my daughter home from the hospital on the first day and Kendrick Lamar's album, *To Pimp a Butterfly* coming out the day after, the day we got home from the hospital. Kendrick Lamar released this; what I was hearing was this fantastic album.

I put on headphones, was listening to the album while holding my daughter in her nursery, while she slept. It was in the morning, super early, obviously, in the morning, because the sleeping hours weren't regulated at that point. It was like, sunrise coming through the window, a very picture-perfect moment. Hearing this album for the first time, holding my newborn daughter in my arms for the first time, or at the house, essentially, and just having this really, really beautiful experience with the music and the emotions of your child being home. That experience stuck with me. The album stuck with me. I kept listening to it, and I was like, this is just fantastic. It is incredible music.

Then also, I just knew that there was stuff being talked about. There was a story that I didn't understand. There are certain lines, or issues, or concepts that I'm like, "What is that? What is he talking about there?" I just kept listening to it, and I just became more and more curious about what he was saying. That's when the light bulb went in my head. I was like, "I want to learn more about this album. What if I studied it in the way that I used to study music in college?" That was the premise for what became Dissect was that initial idea of, like, what if I took this album as seriously as I used to take Beethoven, or Shostakovich in college?"

[0:49:00] LW: You said you'd also been killing time just scrolling through, I guess, Instagram, or something at night, hours on end.

[0:49:06] CC: Yeah. That was another component of it. Of just like, not having that creative outlet, and you got to do something with your time. I just felt like that was when Instagram was first popular and social media was really taking over our lives, and I just – it was probably the first time, this was 2015-2016. Probably the time we started realizing like, these devices, this social media can be toxic, or can be wasteful, or you know what I mean? It had really gotten to a point where we were starting to realize some of the detriments of it. I found that I was spending – how I used to put it was like, was spending a lot of my time on a bunch of things, which means just scrolling through Instagram, the next post, the next post, the next. Microseconds of your life all accumulate to this; you'll spend hours on your phone. That substantial amount of time is not being spent with any one thing.

That was motivation like, I want to spend my time like I used to, which was dedicating myself to one thing rather than a million things. That, again, was inspired by Kendrick Lamar. Just really

sitting down and writing an essay about it. Then with the Serial influence, it was like, what if I formatted it similar to Serial, where it's a long-form analysis, just like Serial tells a long-form story, just broken up into these short episodes? I was like, well, what if I did one song per episode?

By the end of the season, we have this comprehensive analysis of an entire 16-track album. That seemed like a consumable way to go back to my comments about the music that I used to make, which was what I thought was meaningful, innovative, but also accessible. That was the accessible component of the podcast was like, "Yeah, we're going to do a 13-hour analysis of one album," which sounds pretty daunting on its own. But yeah, we're going to break it up into these 30-minute episodes.

[0:50:55] LW: You got this amazing idea, but you also just had a kid. Did you get any pushback from your wife, or your parents, anybody saying, "Look, Cole. It's hard having a kid, and you can't spend your free time working on some passion project." Anything like that? Or were people pretty supportive?

[0:51:14] CC: I don't think I told anyone about the podcast, aside from my wife, until it was out, or it was about to come out.

[0:51:23] LW: Was that intentional, like you just didn't want to hear if people don't have anything to say?

[0:51:26] CC: It was mostly because I wasn't really doing it for anyone else. It really started as a passion project. I needed that creative outlet filled. I wanted to do a study of Kendrick Lamar's album. Personally, I just wanted to learn more about that album. I truly didn't do it for anyone other than myself. I always say, if I were trying to start a successful podcast, it would not be a 13-hour analysis of one album. That's not the one that sounds like it would be a hit, right? Not at all. It really was about me just getting back into something creative and then the act of publishing it and conceptualizing it as a podcast, I mean, of course, I would want people to listen to it, but it was mostly just me making sure that I followed through with the thing.

At least for me, the imaginary audience is really important. Knowing that someone is going to hear this eventually. You're going to share this eventually, rather than just me writing about the album with no structure, or whatever. It was way easier, more manageable for me to, yeah, have this concept and fulfill this concept and give me a goal to work towards. Otherwise, it'll just be aimless writing, I think. Just conceptualizing that way. It's also exciting like, "Oh, I'm going to make this podcast and learn how to do that." It was fulfilling all those creative juices that I was missing. But it wasn't trying to be successful in the beginning, at least.

[0:52:49] LW: You brought together music composition theory, history, culture, philosophy, all the things you've been essentially passionate about in your life. I'm curious, where did the experience at the coffee shop come into play? I know you were a creative director there. Did that play a part in maybe coming up with the logo, or what did that end up translating as in Dissect?

[0:53:10] CC: Yeah. I think the marketing experience there really helped, actually. I found myself to be pretty good at social media, so much so that I ended up doing it for the company that I was working for at Temple. We had really good success. That was when Instagram was taking off and coffee photos specifically was in the early days of Instagram, were a huge trend, I'm sure you remember. We really capitalized on that trend, and our Instagram account exploded, especially for that time. I really learned how to navigate social. As much as I knew the double-edged sword of social media, I also understood the utility of it.

When I did end up conceptualizing Dissect, packaging it as a product, and then selling it on social media, I ended up doing that pretty well with Dissect, and continue to do it pretty well with Dissect now. That was definitely something I took from – that's more logistic. I mean, there's some creative aspect to social media for sure, but there's also a marketing strategic part of it, which I learned – was forced to learn by doing social media as my job through Temple. Definitely got some reps in there. Figured out the algorithms and all the ways to get yourself out there, which really helped with Dissect eventually.

[0:54:19] LW: I started this podcast in 2020. We recorded maybe five or six episodes. The audio was horrible. I almost didn't release it. I was like, I just can't. Because all you hear are the mistakes. You don't hear the great content. What was your version of that? Did you have to redo

anything? Were there challenges that you just were – other than your voice, obviously? Was there anything else that you just think was boring, or what was your feeling about launching it?

[0:54:45] CC: I was good at the audio stuff because I had done that for years. It's the technical aspect, which is a big hurdle for a lot of people, was not one for me. It wasn't anything fancy. I had a \$100 microphone and Logic on my Mac, but you don't really need anything fancy for podcasting. That component was not the issue.

For me, it was mostly getting the format in a way that I thought was entertaining. Making sure that the music clips and the analysis were spaced out in a way that was flowing. But the biggest hurdle for me was definitely my voice. I just not felt comfortable. I have naturally low energy and monotone. That's the way; just in real life, that's who I am. I didn't think that would be entertaining for people. I thought people would get bored. I hadn't yet realized that podcasting is at its best when you are yourself, whatever that is.

If you listen to the first couple of seasons of Dissect, you'll hear me playing with my voice in real-time. You listen to season one versus season two; I have a different voice, especially season three from season two, totally different voice. It's me trying to overcome this insecurity of my voice being monotone. I'm trying to be animated in all these different ways that I look back on now and just be like, sounds so forced and bad.

Even just in the last couple of years, and I've now been doing this, like, what? Seven years or something. Only by season, I want to say, season seven is when I really started to feel like, I was just being myself and finally found my voice over a hundred episodes in, where I just felt comfortable. I realized that people were connecting to me personally very fast in season one, but I didn't really let that manifest into the creativity of the show in terms of me just trying to talk naturally while I read the scripts. It's such a simple concept now, and I'm just like, "Why did it take me so long?"

But that's all I had to do is be myself, read how I normally read, or talk how I normally talk, and it's going to be fine. People will pick up that that's my natural personality. That was the biggest hurdle of not only publishing the podcast but just for years after, even having success with

Dissect. The success actually brought more pressure to be more entertaining, which then led to me playing with my voice in all these weird ways that I cringe at now.

[0:57:04] LW: A couple of questions about your process. You write a script, basically. Can you walk us through that process, just in terms of the time you're investing? Your analysis, you offer a lot of interpretations. I'm curious, how do you find these interpretations? Are there other people who've done this that you borrow from? Are they all original for you? Do you have to sit with a song, you play it 20 times in order to realize Kanye is saying suicide, versus whatever he was actually saying? How do you gather these insights?

[0:57:40] CC: It's definitely a combination of a lot of things. There's an initial research process that starts before I even write anything. I'm researching the artist and the album. Finding out all I can, listening to all the interviews. You build up this well of knowledge before I even start writing a word. All that will help inform the interpretations when you get to them. Because what I try to do is, of course, there's subjectivity in what I do. I mean, it's inherently subjective. I am not the person that wrote this music, and so whatever I say is my interpretation. That's it. There are really no facts aside from here's when it was made and blah, blah, blah. Here is who made it.

Context for me, is everything. Context historically, context about the artist, the context within the song and album itself, how one line can lead to the next, or you see one theme developed throughout the entire project, which then would inform a certain line. I always try to justify the interpretation through context, and I do that through research and just, yeah, thinking broadly about these things. When it comes down to the actual analysis, it's really as simple as me copy-pasting the lyrics onto a document, starting with the first line, writing about the first line, writing about the second line, seeing if there are any connections with the previous line and then it all just builds on itself. You can imagine that throughout an entire album at one song, how one line can lead to the next, and you start to develop like, "Oh, that connects to this thing, or that connects to this thing, or this artist has a tendency to do this thing lyrically. Oh, he's doing it again here."

You just notice patterns, connections and really trying to bring them all together in a way that's smooth, entertaining and cohesive. All the disparate elements you're trying to just fuse. Doing a service for the listener and just presenting the information cleanly, where it feels. Like, I'm not

reaching all over the place and you're justifying in the interpretations. At the end of the day, they are just interpretations.

[0:59:42] LW: People like Steven Pressfield, the writer, and Elizabeth Gilbert talk about the muse and how the muse feeds you ideas. I'm curious, do you get to a point after sitting with the song for so long that it starts speaking to you, and it tells you what it means or what it could mean? Is there a line between your intuition and whatever research you've done?

[1:00:01] CC: Yeah. I mean, there are revelation moments, and maybe that's how you're – where it just clicks. There's definitely some moments that I've had it. Just everything, “Oh, that's it. That's the thing.” There's definitely that. When I feel like I've really got to the heart of the song, that's when, yeah, if you want to say, speaking to me, that's when I feel the deepest connection with it. When I realize what I think is going on, what I think the message is, or the expression is, and then what it could represent to the – for the album, but also, again, going back to the human experience. What is it conveying about the human experience? Those are the things that I really get excited about, and I feel connected to the artist through.

Yeah. I mean, I definitely develop a pretty deep relationship with the artist and the album that I analyze. I'm spending months of my time dedicated to them, so it's only natural that I start to feel a connection to the music. So much so that most of the albums that I dissect, I don't end up listening to a lot. It is not because of fatigue. It's just because when I put the album on, the relationship is so heavy that it's like, it's hard for me to just listen to the album, you know what I mean? Because the connection is so deep that it's the only thing I can do is just listen to the album. I can't be doing anything else because it just conjures up a bunch of thoughts and emotions when I listen to those projects back.

[1:01:24] LW: Lorne Michaels, the producer of Saturday Night Live says, “We don't go on when we're ready. We go on because it's 11.30.” In other words, they need that deadline because they're hardly ever ready. I imagine in your endeavor, your creative endeavor, you can keep going another layer deep and another layer deeper, and how do you know when to stop and say, “Okay, this is enough. I have enough context”?

[1:01:46] CC: Actually, it's not as challenging as it might sound. What I try not to do is inject myself too much into the show. In moments when I do do that, I try to be very deliberate and like, I am taking a detour here. Come with me on this detour. For the most part, I'm just trying to get out what the artist is saying. I feel like, if I'm looking too much into it and if I'm getting too overboard with the interpretations, where they become so distant from the source material, I feel like that's me injecting myself into the show. Where the ideas become more about me and less about what the artist is saying, that's really what I'm trying to convey or showcase is like, what is this human being saying to us? What is this human being communicating to us?

Again, yeah, if I get too far off in my own crazy analysis, I feel like it reels away from what the artist is saying. Not to say that a Kendrick Lamar doesn't have all these layers. I intuitively have a feeling of where I'm overstepping and injecting myself too much. I feel an intuition there. If I feel like I'm doing that, I start to back away from it.

[1:02:55] LW: Talk about the reaction, or the response you get from the listeners and also, the people who now want to collaborate with you. How did you navigate all of that? Were you checking numbers every day? Or, were you just surrendered to it and said, "It'll be what it is." What was your attitude?

[1:03:13] CC: It's definitely a journey. It still is a journey in terms of in the beginning; of course, it's very exciting. People like the thing that you're doing. In that first season, I didn't have that many listeners. But starting from scratch, even getting a couple of hundred listeners, feels really good. Once in a while, you get an email, and someone will say, "I really enjoyed this, whatever."

Early on, I started to get some of those, and it's encouraging. It definitely helps you with the work and especially with a show like Dissect, which is a lot of work. Every episode's a 6,000-word script. It's a lot of writing and research and stuff. In the beginning, it was great. Then season two is when it really exploded with the Kanye season.

[1:03:54] LW: Kanye. Yeah.

[1:03:55] CC: That's when things just took off faster than I knew what was happening type thing. That's when the numbers started to really jump. That's when I started to get outside

interest in terms of having deals, podcast companies reaching out like, “Can we bring Dissect into our network?” Me really feeling like this was a legitimate opportunity to make a career doing something that I created and that I loved, which has been like, this whole conversation has to be about me working towards the same goal and different iterations, which was doing something creative that I loved for my job. It wasn't the underlying goal of all of my endeavors was like, that's what I want to do.

I hadn't found that yet. When it became a real opportunity and a real possibility, it was very exciting but also, really, really nerve-wracking. By the time season two ended, I had joined Spotify and was able to quit my job and formally dissect my full-time job, which was definitely a life goal fulfilled. I was extremely happy. It was surreal. It was just, yeah, 20 years of work and different iterations to get me to that point of being able to do that.

The thing that you don't hear talked about is what happens after that, which is, I think, really interesting. At least, my experience of it was really interesting because when you're working toward a goal, you don't actually imagine what's on the other side of the goal. Because you're so determined on accomplishing the goal. It blinds you to anything after that. When you get it, there's an exhalation, but then there's a, I don't know. You've been working towards this thing your entire life. Now what? What's the next thing, or is there a next thing?

It's a real, yeah, I don't know. It definitely threw me for a loop because I was really happy and ecstatic to do that thing, but then a few months after that, I was like – almost felt like I was missing something. Even though I love doing the show still, I am still passionate about doing Dissect, but at that moment, it was just like, wow, it's weird. It was just a weird, really weird feeling. Almost like an empty feeling afterward that I didn't really expect to hear artists talk about it all the time in the music, but when you experience it. You don't really understand the concept of, I wouldn't say, I was unhappy at all, but the post-success emptiness is a real thing, which is if you haven't been on the other side of it yet, it's hard to imagine, and until you experience it, I think.

[1:06:30] LW: One thing I want to note about the podcast, the Spotify deal as well is you said, these other people who wanted to collaborate with you, a lot of them are well-meaning, but their vision of what they wanted and what you wanted didn't always align. You said that Courtney at

Spotify, the way he articulated what your mission was, was right in alignment with. That was one of the indicators that helped you to know that this is the right deal for you at that time.

[1:06:58] CC: Yeah, it's interesting because Dissect is my baby. It's like this thing I created and worked really hard and was getting success, so you become very protective of the I found. You think getting all these opportunities, you just say yes, because it's like, "Ooh, finally. Someone wants me." But I found myself doing the opposite, where I was like, "What do you want? What are you trying to do with my thing?" I was very hesitant. I was exploring opportunities, but I wasn't saying yes, which, actually, something I try to talk about for any aspiring creatives is like, saying yes to the right things and saying no when it doesn't feel right. Because the temptation to say yes, because people are giving you attention, will be very strong. And so you jump at what could be bad opportunities just because you have an opportunity.

What I intuitively knew, and maybe just because I was a little older, too, was just, yeah, this could be my one shot, and I don't want to fuck it up. I definitely declined some opportunities that, if I were younger, I probably would have said yes to, and that would have not been as, who's to say what would have happened, but I don't think it would have been as successful as me joining Spotify. It wasn't even about Spotify, because when I got that call, I was just like, well, one, it was really surreal. But also, they weren't really doing podcasts at the time, so I was like, what are they going to really offer me? That's when Courtney — one, he understood the show.

Everyone most of the people I talked to didn't really understand the show. They just saw it was charting on iTunes, and they just wanted a piece of it. Courtney articulated what the show was, why it was special, why he believed in it, and how, out of all the things he was going to help me with. The biggest part was he didn't want to change the show at all, which was true. It's still true to this day, Spotify has never asked me to do anything that I didn't want to do. I believed him. I felt good. There was an intuitive, good feeling about the conversation I had with him, and it ended up panning out perfectly for my situation.

[1:08:57] LW: How did you end up navigating that lack of fulfillment after the deal? Did it come back when you started doing more seasons, or how does that work?

[1:09:05] CC: For me, it was just something that I needed to think through I think more than anything and just realized that I was doing the thing that I've been working towards, and that was the fulfillment. The sustainment of success was now the goal. Preserving the baby was the thing now. What I'm still doing now is like, the challenge of Dissect now is me staying excited about it, not having it feel like work because it is my work, and just making sure the show is as good or better than it was at any other time in its history, you know what I mean? And not burn out, or feel like I'm going through the motions.

I've had to learn to challenge myself in new ways. Did some side projects here and there with other shows. But Dissect is still the main thing that I'm doing, the exact same thing that I was doing when I started the show, the first episode. The process is pretty much the same. You see, now, I still record in my closet. All that was intentional because I didn't want to veer too far from what got me here in the first place. I felt like, if I had this huge team helping me, if I started recording at a studio and, you know what I mean? All these things that would take the show, I don't know. I just want to stay true to what it was, which was writing about music and recording it. As simple as that.

[1:10:24] LW: You've dissected Kendrick; you dissected Frank Ocean, Kanye, obviously, Tyler the Creator, and Mac Miller. These are all artists that are a bit complicated and troubled in one way or another. Is there a formula to the way you choose the artists that you end up dissecting?

[1:10:40] CC: There are consistent elements that I think about, which you can call formula, I guess. The first thing is I have to like the album. I veered away from that when I collaborated specifically with season seven on, *Because of the Internet* by Donald Glover. I wasn't in love with that album, but I found someone that loved that album, and we collaborated, and then I ended up loving the album through the process, which was really cool.

For the most part, I have to love the album. I'm about to spend six months of my life with it, so you know what I mean? I have to have some connection to it, and initially, I do focus on bigger artists, and that's just one, somewhat strategic, just in terms of an audience. But also, I'm really interested in the people that are shaping culture, that have a big influence on what's happening historically right now. Who are the artists that we're going to look back on? We're looking back

on Beethoven, and I've tried to choose for the most part with some exceptions; who knows? That's Kanye. That's Beyonce.

I can guarantee you in 200 years, the people that we're talking about now are going to be Kanye West for sure. Going to be Beyonce, for sure. Going to be Kendrick Lamar, for sure. I would bet my life on those three artists, being some of the ones that make it historically. Part of the premise of the show is giving the artists that will last in that way respect now and study them now as if they were dead for 200 years, like the way that we study Beethoven. That's part of it. Then part of it is, does the album itself have enough thematic stuff going on that's going to carry an entire season? There are a lot of great albums that I like that I don't actually think would make for a great Dissect series, just because there are not enough meat on the bone, so to speak.

It's a lot to go under – undergo a 13-hour analysis of your album. To have an entertaining and thought-provoking season, there's got to be enough ideas and lyricism and musicality in there to sustain that analysis, where some albums will fall short. However great they are, there are certain albums that work for the format that I've created, and so I tend to focus on those.

[1:12:41] LW: Is that why you haven't done Kid A yet?

[1:12:42] CC: Yeah, pretty much. That's probably my favorite album all time with, along with To Pimp a Butterfly, but it's like, there are eight words per song. It's literally pulling lyrics out of a hat. The lyrics don't mean anything.

[1:12:56] LW: Is that real, that that's what they do? They pull lyrics out of a hat?

[1:12:59] CC: For that album specifically. There are reasons for that that are interesting, but it's like, that's five minutes of the pot, you know what I mean? That'll take five minutes to explain, and then what? You know what I mean? It's like, I want to do a radio hit album, but it won't be that one, just because unless people really want to hear some really fucking technical music theory, which there's some of that in the show, but I dose it out in pieces because I don't think it can get that technical and people will be interested.

[1:13:28] LW: Having achieved this massive goal of having this full-time job. You're the sole creator of this thing. How are you thinking about success these days, especially since you got the thing and found that it didn't make you more fulfilled, at least initially?

[1:13:41] CC: I feel successful, generally speaking. I'm doing something that I feel is meaningful to me and, hopefully, to others. The work that I get paid to do, I feel, is meaningful. I think that's what I've always wanted. If I could boil it down, talk about it being creative, but I think the concept if you make it more ambiguous, is more universal. It's finding meaningful work. But even beyond that, finding meaningful work in your life, I think, is what makes you successful.

You might get paid for it. You might not. That's to me, what I've defined as success, you know what I mean? Whenever Dissect crumbles, and I don't do this for a living, I imagine that scenario a lot. It gave me a lot of anxiety for a long time because that's another thing you think about when you find success is losing it. Looking back, I had real anxiety about that for probably a good two years, where it keep literally keep me up at night, or I'd wake up at 2 a.m. freaking out. Like, what am I going to do when this thing crumbles?

[1:14:45] LW: Are you in a contract for a certain number of years, or how is a deal structured?

[1:14:49] CC: No. It's just, I'm technically an employee, but they could cancel the show. You know what I mean? It's up to them. It's never been X amount of seasons. It's been more of a, I guess, a non-spoken agreement of as long as it's successful, we're going to continue it. Why not? That's at least what I assumed about the partnership and how it's played out to this day. I think I found solace in the idea of Dissect going away one day.

What I know about myself is that I will not be satisfied until I find the next meaningful thing. I know if that's my goal, I'll find it, I guess, is what I'm trying to get at. I don't know if I answered the question, but that's how I find – I guess, it's like, that's what I find –

[1:15:31] LW: Impact. It's something meaningful for you, but also something that could be meaningful for others as well.

[1:15:37] CC: I mean, usually when the thing is meaningful for you, it's because it's meaningful for other people, I think, right?

[1:15:43] LW: Yeah.

[1:15:44] CC: It's symbiotic in that way naturally, which is nice for the world, I think.

[1:15:49] LW: Why do you think we still listen to artists like Beethoven hundreds of years later? What was it about their compositions that stood the test of time? Or is it something a little more political than that?

[1:16:02] CC: I think it's both. There's definitely a conversation to be about what we have chosen to preserve as a culture and how that stems from other shit. We study white male artists, and that reflects our culture. There's that component. There's a part of me that doesn't like saying that because it does undermine artists like Beethoven, whom I don't care, male or female. His music is fucking brilliant. The music stands on its own. There are also political components and social components that go into how the filter has filtered historically. I'll stick with the music.

Part of it, again, academia is the one that preserves these artists, so there's that conversation, too. The Greats are great for a reason. You study them, and you realize, yeah, they have stood the test of time for a reason. There are probably others. I think that's probably maybe where the conversation should go. There are others that probably should have been preserved that have not been. But the ones that happen to preserve for the most part are also justified in their preservation.

Again, not to sound repetitive, but I do think it's we intuitively connect to meaningful work and something that educates us about our experience on earth. I think all the great artists, when you really get into it, communicate that in some way, whether that's intrinsically like Beethoven doesn't have words for the most part, some of the operas do. I feel like, that's the magic of music to me is that things can be communicated without language. I think we emotionally resonate on some weird level that I don't have words to describe, but we all feel it and know it. That someone was able to represent an emotion or an experience accurately and abstractly

through art. I think that the universal thing across all art mediums is the things that really stand the test of time, are, one innovative, so they have pushed boundaries of the art form and that's why we study them, because we can draw a line between Beethoven before and Beethoven after and the effect Beethoven had on all music going forward, a dramatic effect.

It's why we can say the same thing about Kanye West. Kanye is the exact same thing. There's an innovative component, but on top of that, and probably, I think more importantly, is that yeah, there's an accuracy of communication that we just all feel intrinsically. That resonates differently with different people. For the most part, I think they just tap into something universal that I think a lot of people resonate with. Again, that could be – doesn't have to be Beethoven. That could be whoever it is for you. It's going to be different for me. But there are these artists that seem to capture more than we generally gravitate towards as a culture almost. Other, just something a little extra that defies explanation in some ways.

[1:19:03] LW: I want to echo something you wrote in season two about Kanye, where you said – hopefully, I'm saying this for memory, but 'Talent hits a target that no one else can hit. Genius hits a target that no one else can see,' as a Schopenhauer quote. What you just said reminded me of that. But then I want to quote you now. In the same season, you said that one of the lessons that you learned, or one of your mantras, was the world gives you nothing until you give it everything.

[1:19:30] CC: Yeah. I mean, that quote actually just takes me a bit exactly back to that time in my life when it did feel like I was giving it everything. I was maxed out at that point. There would have been no season three of Dissect if I wasn't able to do it full-time. I was working eight hours a day. I was coming home and spending time with my newborn baby and wife. They would go to sleep and I would work on the podcast. I'd get up early and work on the podcast, go to work, repeat, repeat, repeat. I was exhausted by the end of season two. That statement rings really true about that time of my life, where I felt like I was at some finish line, and I had given it everything that I could at that time in my life, to that point in my life.

One of the things, my personal experience, was that it worked out. I hope that the same is true for everyone else. I tried really hard. I tried really, really, really, really hard for years. It wasn't just Dissect. It's everything else that led to that. It was just me never giving up on that initial dream of

doing something that I loved and created for my job as a living, as my full-time thing. I can say that statement is true, that I felt that that was the truth in my experience.

[1:20:42] LW: Beautiful, man. I think it's a great place to end it. Appreciate your time, Cole. Thanks so much for your transparency and sharing your story. Next time I'm in Sacramento, I'll reach out and let you know.

[1:20:53] CC: Oh, yeah. Yeah, thanks for having me. This was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:20:56] LW: Thank you so much for listening to my interview with Cole Cuchna. For more inspiration, you can follow Cole's work on the socials @dissectpodcast. Dissect is spelled D-I-S-S-E-C-T. You can listen to his long-form musical analysis on Spotify, or for more short-form analysis, you can check out the Dissect Podcast account on Instagram and TikTok. Of course, I'll drop links to everything else that Cole and I discussed in the show notes on my website, which is lightwatkins.com/podcast.

If this is your first time listening to The Light Watkins Show, we have an incredible archive of past interviews with other luminaries who share how they found their path and their purpose, such as Marianne Williamson, Ava Duvernay, Ed Mylett, Saul Williams, Marcus Samuelsson and many more. You can even search interviews by subject matter, in case you want to hear more episodes about people who've taken leaps of faith, or people who've overcome financial struggles, etc. You can get a list of all of those episodes at lightwatkins.com/podcast.

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Otherwise, I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with another story about someone just like me and you, who took a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose. Until then, keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart, keep taking those leaps of faith and if no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. Thank you so much. Have a great day. Wishing you lots of love.

[END]