

Episode 53: How to Have Creative Freedom and Owning your Voice with Jonathan Mann

What is going on, everybody. I am so excited to bring on Jonathan, man. Jonathan, you are the only person I know that's a Guinness world record winner. You wrote a song a day for over 12 years now. I mean, is anyone even close to you at this point that I know of? I actually, I have a Google alert, you know, for song a day, so that, so that like, if anyone mentions it, like, I I'll see it.

Cool. And, starting at the beginning of quarantine, The song they alert sort of blowing up because songwriters all over the world of all different shapes and sizes and kinds started doing their own song and they project. And, you know, they would, it would pop up in the press here and there, like such and such musician is doing a song a day.

And so I've started actually going through, we were talking a little bit off mic. I have this assistant and one of the things I'm having her do is start to collect. All of these song a day projects and put them all into a spreadsheet, who they were, how long they did it for where the project lives. And I'm hoping like@somepointintheworldthedomainsongaday.org. Yeah. I would love to like compile the world's most complete compendium. Pro of song a day projects. Like that's such a cool approach to it. Like building a community around people

who had that'd be fun. Right? Like you can just see that everyone's doing it and yeah.

Oh,

that's so awesome. Well, if you guys are new to the show, welcome to the business growth advantage. if you are listening to this on the podcast, you already know Jonathan's work. Cause he's done my theme song. So good. And if you're working on a podcast and you're looking for someone to do your custom theme song, I don't know anyone else who does this besides Jonathan, but I also like his quality is unbelievable.

but I, I want to go a little bit deep on different parts of the business that Jonathan is built here. Especially as, when I say I work with creative entrepreneurs, I'm struggling to think of one of my clients who's on the creative side. That is as committed to their creativity, the way that Jonathan is.

Jonathan, can you give us the story of how the song a day project and now kind of business and movement

started? song and I started, with a flyer that I got in late 2000. Yeah. it's the height of the sort of financial meltdown? I was living in Berkeley at the time with my then girlfriend a friend of ours, like handed me this flyer for a project called fun a day and fun today still happens.

It's every January. It's a, the idea is just make one piece of art every day in the month of January. And people do all kinds of things. Things, they do, sculpture and poems and they do really weird creative things. Like, play a game of Scrabble a day and like take a picture of the board. Like, just anything you can imagine.

And so I got this flyer and, like some other creative projects that I'd been working on, we're sort of wrapping up. So I was like primed and ready. For something new and, I'd already been writing songs at that point. I was 26. I'd been writing. For a long time, since I was like 12, that had been like my passion.

And so, it said make, one piece of art for every day in January. And I said, I'm going to make a song a day. And so January 1st rolled around and, I did 31 days. and that was the intention just

to, just to keep it at that. at the end of the 31 day, You know, I was having such a good time doing it and, you know, I was still unemployed as it, you know, in the financial crisis. even in that first month, the project had like, had gained a little bit of traction and a little bit of attention. And so I decided to keep going. I aimed for a year for all of January, for all of 2009. Then at the end of the year, I just, looked around and, decided to keep going. And it's sort of difficult because, once you, once I committed, to like on J on January 1st, 2010, you know, day 360 6, you know, it's a little bit difficult because it's like, because then it's like, okay, well then, all right, when's the next point? That actually makes sense to stop. I guess two years maybe, but two years is kind of unsatisfying.

It's not a good, like one year is one thing, you know, but two years is kind of like mess. So it's like, when could I really stop? Anyway. So at that point it basically became, it basically became a definite at that time.

Gosh, and this is like weekends holidays

too. Oh yeah. The under all circumstances. Yeah. I actually have a friend, who does a drawing a day and he's been doing a drawing a day for actually longer than I'm doing songs.

Right. he started, I think in late 2007, but, but, but, but he takes weekends off. Um, and so even though his date is earlier, those weekends add up and I have more, I just have, my number is higher of like the songs. And so I always tease him about taking away. That's that's so funny. And when you say that's the song a day, what is the.

Like the completion around that task of like letters. Yeah. Like, is it just kind of writing the lyrics, singing it to yourself or like, does it get documented somewhere?

Yeah. The parameter essentially is the song. it's a song of any length, of any quality, with any instrumentation. that I write between the time I wake up and the time I go to bed and I post to my YouTube channel, like, that's that to me.

Okay.

So YouTube is the main kind of tracking.

Yeah. Oh yeah. Sort of the canonical. Um, it's funny because yeah, article, uh, place. it's funny because I started 2009, you know, YouTube was relatively new and I'd been, I'd been making YouTube videos since 2006 and YouTube was only founded in 2005. now of course, YouTube. it's YouTube. It's like IBM or something. It's like part of the fabric. I've actually befriended this younger guy who's doing a song a day. And he started his on Instagram, because of course he would like, it makes way more sense now to start a project like that on Insta or, or Tik TOK than it would to start on YouTube.

So I, you know, I'm nearing 40 and I think in some ways that, you know, fits, you know, oh yeah, it's that old guy he's, he's making a saga day on, on YouTube.

No, I think it, it, I mean, it's so, so cool. Just as like a human being to see that you've stuck with it for this long, I'm excited to get into like the creative side, more, the business side more.

I also just want to, for anybody who might be new to this, I want to clarify that. Like John, isn't just an artist. Like there are some legitimate, like greatest hits to what he's done. And I know I found Jonathan because of the sleep with me podcast that I listened to like religiously almost every night for years.

And I was like, wait, This guy, it sounds like I can like find him online, reach out to him and he can

help me write my, the theme song so that people could find me and drew who makes that podcast has been so kind to me to like lend me, the, the song for access to his audience, which is a great audience.

Yeah. Yeah.

He's I love that podcast, but you've got, you've got baby Yoda. There's the whole apple connection. Give us some of your highlight reel here. Cause I know you said earlier, You know, it takes like 5,000 songs, sometimes four to have those, those handful of things that raise the, the, the value of this whole library that you're doing.

Yeah. As I was saying off Mike, like there's, there's literally two songs that just in terms of royalty payments, if we're talking like actual, just like cold, hard bottom line, there's literally two songs. that make more in royalties than all the rest of them combined. and you know, one of them is baby Yoda and, and that was a total accident.

Just like, these are all accidents. Like this is, this is, this is like, this is my baby. The thing is that, I'm all about, by necessity, I've learned to be all about wins. my whims go further and faster than any of my schemes. I'll I have tons of ideas and I'm constantly trying things and none of them work like, like, no matter what I do, it's, it's super, super, super cool there that like any scheme I like, but literally the thing that I made.

That I have no agenda for. I had no agenda for the baby Yoda song. I wrote it because I liked baby Yoda and second episode where he was heavily featured of the Mandalorian. And I was like, I love baby out of so much. He's so cute. Like he's amazing. And so I made a song and I liked the song. I was like, oh, this is a good song.

I like. And just on a whim, I posted it to Spotify, posted it to all the streaming services and it happened to make its way into the Tik TOK sort of bloodstream. And, became literally by far, my most listened to my most profitable, my most viewed by, by factors, you know, like, it has 7 million views versus or 8 million views.

On YouTube versus my next highest is 2 million. It has, it has 4 million streams on Spotify versus my next highest is like 300,000. It's like, it's not even close. And it was literally a whim. I, and I'm convinced that like, if I had, because this happens if I had sat down and said, I'm going to make a baby Yoda songs, because I know that people are going to really think it's cute and it's gonna, it's going to blow up.

It's going to be this big thing wouldn't have worked. Yeah. Like there's even like, uh there's even, I th I'm convinced this is a little woo-hoo. But like, I'm convinced that there's even like a reverse kind of secret thing that's happening where reverse, like where, like, if I envision it it's like the opposite.

If I envision it, it's not going to happen. But at the time my mind is blank. it's more like, if I'm just like, you know, if I'm just following my. so like another example is same thing is, is the iPhone four and tennis song, which is like, you know, not, huge in terms of numbers, but was used by Steve jobs to open a press conference, you know?

And so, That was exactly the same thing. It was night before this press conference that they were having. And I decided to make a song about it. And, you know, I didn't, think that they were gonna, I didn't like think to myself, I'm going to make this song. And Steve jobs is going to write to me and asked me to like, use the song in his press conference.

No, I didn't. That didn't, that didn't cross my mind once it was just a total whim. Like, I'm just gonna make this. about this apple thing that's happening and that's what happens. So, yeah, so cool. And I mean, don't, you now have like a theme song to like a TV show too. so the, maybe I think the thing you're thinking of is the James Comey thing.

Oh, yeah. Is that what you're thinking of? Well, I thought I saw either like an HBO or

Showtime. Yes, yes. Yeah. So that's, so that's another whim. That's an, that's another example where, how can I do this without getting explicitly political, James Comey, you know, former FBI director, fired by Trump I had written this song when he had sort of more or less, you know, reopened.

This was at the F uh, like right leading up to 2016 election, you know, mere days before the election, he had quote unquote reopened this, the FBI investigation and Hillary's emails or whatever. So I made a song called F U James Cohen. I actually said the words I w I'm bleeping them for hours. okay.

And so it was just another song, literally, just like, um, I'm very angry at James Comey right now for doing this. And so I'm going to let them know I'm going to make this song about it, four years go by and I get an email from Showtime and they're making this movie out of James Comey's book.

Called a higher loyalty. And Jeff Daniels is playing, James Comey. And they asked me if, they can use the F you James Comey song. I was like, you know, we went through it and they paid me for it and everything and, but it was like heavily featured. It was like a two-part mini series. It opened the second part of the ministers and they played almost the whole song. It was like they played it over a montage of people, of different people, including his family, James Comey's family, reacting to the election of Donald Trump. And everyone's really mad at James Comey. And so they, they have my song playing.

They don't bleep it out. It's in there. And so now hanging on my wall over here, I have. The invoice that I got from CBS its own Showtime, because cool. It says CBS, but then it says for what the good is, the good is U James Comey. And I just think that's just the best. Oh, that's but again, a whim, you know, like, uh, there's no way I could have sat down and said, I'm going to make a song that in four years it was going to be used.

Showtime, it just doesn't work like that. It's just, you know, and, if I did, I can, I could list a thousand instances where I've done the exact opposite, where I've tried hard to like, make things work and they just, they just don't. Yeah, I've learned, like, I just have to sort of catch the cultural current, if I can.

But it's like, not, it's not really up to me. It's like, you know, every once in awhile, my own interests and my own feelings about things perfectly align with the zeitgeists, with like what the culture at large is interested in. And it's like those moments that it happens, but I can't. I can't predict it.

You know, I could spend all day looking at Google trends and I don't think that would help me at all.

when you look back on everything that you've done on the, the streak with the 12 and a half years, what are you most proud of?

the thing that keeps me going the most on some days we talked a little bit about this, like, well, you know, like what motivates, and this is, this is something that I, sort of forgot to mention, but it's a big one you know, a lot of days I'll get comments, no matter what the song is.

Sometimes it's very surprising to me, but I'll get comments that say, this is like exactly what I needed to hear today. This is, this song was the thing that, that I needed today or the song got me through something or, it doesn't get any better than that. Like that's, that's by far the sort of deepest and longest lasting, kind of nourishment my creative soul.

go as I go through this, you know, that's, that's the stuff that like really matters. Yeah.

Yeah. Has it gotten to a point now where you're like starting to recognize certain like names and handles of people that are constantly engaging with you? Oh, sure.

Yeah. that's a really like wonderful piece of it is that, you know, people, I've lost two fans like that have died.

that basically were there every day for year, years, years, and years and years and years and years. and both times it was completely unexpected and both times. It really affected me where I, like, I noticed that they were gone ultimately like a family member would reach out and be like, you know, they're, you know, they're gone.

And, I made songs for both of them and, so there are people like that, you know, there are people who just sort of become, become part of it. there was a guy for a long time. Uh, he doesn't do it as much anymore. he's sort of a character in and of himself. His name is John.

He, he commented for probably about five years, maybe five and a half years every day. And it was always the same comment, the same comment every day for like, yeah. Maybe like five and a half years. That's awesome. The comment was, this song is great. They should play it on the radio every single day, every single day.

That's awesome. He actually, so he's very interesting because he became famous. in his own, right? for a number of things most recently, he has a very successful in some ways more successful than my channel, actually like the views he gets every day for these are often higher and it's called John drinks water.

And what he does is he gets on video and he drinks a bottle of water and one gun. And that's it every day. he did it multiple times a day. So he did it for like 10,000 days, 10, 10,000 waters over the course of, I think, like three and a half years or something. My gosh. Yeah. So he, so he reached, I wrote him a song when he reached 10,000 water.

Oh, so cool. Yeah.

Now. We we talked to before we hit the live button about this. Like not just being a job for you, but really a call. I dive a little bit into the creative process to the extent that you're willing to. So when it comes to, every day, you sitting down and having a song that ends up on YouTube, is there a typical.

Beginning to that. Like, do you start with the lyrics or are there just kind of melodies that you like keep, maybe you batch the melodies or

like how's this all work? so I actually made a podcast all about this. It's called it's called as it happens. Uh oh, cool. a little plug for the podcast, as it happens song a day, you got to put songs because it was a different as it happens that that exists too.

That's more famous than mine in Canada. as it happens song a day and it's just 12 episodes, maybe 10 episodes, and essentially all it is is you hear the process. You hear me writing a song

in real time. and the way that I frame it, And the thing that I say in the beginning of each episode is that, there are a million ways to write a song, and you never know what's going to come out. and so each episode, literally my goal was basically to start in a different way. to start the song in a different way in each episode. Cool. So one day, one day, I'm starting with the lyrics. One day, I'm starting with the music one day, I'm starting with the melody one day, I'm starting with an idea one day, I'm starting with nothing, and that, that is how it works for me.

Like There's no one path. cool. The process for me is all encompassing and literally, you know, there are infinite ways to do it and I've tried most of them probably at this point. Oh my gosh. And so, and let's say that, like you, you're not at your house, you're traveling.

Is there like a travel friendly. Version of what you do. Like you could just sing it into a phone or yeah.

Something like that. Singing it into the phone is, is a, is a tried and true. So tried and true makes yeah. That's it. You said it.

I just wrote down again when we were talking before I hit the live here, you talked about just like, sometimes you just got to poop something out.

Yeah. Just make something. Yeah. And I

love that as a creative entrepreneur, but as a business owner in general. Yeah. Of, you know, I talked to so many fellow lawyers who feel like there's such a bar that we hold ourselves to, that it can be really difficult to hit the submit button on something that we're working on or even getting started because it's like, let me produce a work today.

uh, you know, I don't know enough about, loitering, you know, to like to know. Right. but I know that in, the kind of pursuit that I'm in, ultimately, starting from something is always easier than starting from nothing. So. And the only way, really, a lot of times to start from nothing to get to something is to turn off all critical faculties and like just.h Yeah. Like we said, poop it out. Just like make sense because, because then you've made something and something can be honed. It's like, even if it's just one little piece of that, that you can take, you still are ahead of the game. It's always easier, you know, like, that's why prompts exists, right?

It's like if you have a blank sheet of paper, but someone says, you know, be a blank sheet of paper and you just have to start with something that's really daunting. But someone says, a rainy day or something or whatever, like then, you know, that's something, it's something that, if you just make something, you just start somewhere.

And not let it be too, precious or, not attached to it. that that's sort of

are there times when, you rewatch baby Yoda or one of your other big videos. And you're like, ah, if I would've known this would have gotten this big, oh, I wouldn't fix this and this and this a hundred percent, a hundred percent.

I there's so much that I regret about maybe Yoda specifically, like, I approached that song, I had no idea. Right. And so people love the chorus and people like, generally people hate the verses because I was trying to do look sort of a fo baby sort of fo Yoda. But it ends up sounding more like the character from itch, like the clown, you know?

And so, and so actually when season two was coming out, I did a remix of the song and I got my first. but again, it's, it was a plan and it was super, ah, but I got my friend, who's a beautiful voice to sing the verses. And I was like, I'm going to fix this. And like, I'm going to make it sound better, but everyone wants the original, you know, warts and all, I guess.

part of me, I'm not above critiquing myself. At all. It's a part of me really wonders. Like, could the song have gone even further if, if I had known and if I had really polished it up beforehand, you know, could the song have gone even further or alternately was part of the lack of Polish? What made it successful? Like there's no way to know. We have no counterfactuals to, really sure. But I,

I do like, though that you. You are kind of letting it be either or because one thing that, that I talk a lot of business owners about, especially when it comes to producing content, video, or other things, that's the more we think that the most polished wins, the more we want to buy the latest camera or lighting or whatever, and it can just procrastinate us actually.

Doing the thing, because we

don't feel ready yet. I have a super good spiel about that, actually. So, this was probably back in like 2013. So like year five of song a day. And, um, I was living in New York. I was living in Brooklyn and I met this guy, Rob, who was a singer songwriter, just like me.

And we sort of struck up a friend. And he, took me to his studio that he worked out of and it was like this beautiful, like he literally had, um, he literally had a, the Doobie brothers. mixing console, the mixing console that the Doobie brothers had used, I think it was the . So something like that, some really famous band they've used this mixing console, vintage gear, the beautiful guitars, the best mix, everything.

You know, it wasn't his studio. He worked there, he was allowed to use it whenever he wanted, you know, it was his boss's studio, but like, that was where he worked and he, he could use the studio anytime. There wasn't someone there. He could use it at any time. and then I brought him to my studio, you know, we're gonna work on a song together.

And I brought her into my studio. It's in a basement, it floods, I have like shitty guitars everywhere and like \$50 microphones. And he's like, I love this. It's like, he's like, this is amazing. He's like, he's like, I just, I feel so free down here. Like we can just make whatever we want.

Oh, interesting.

It can just, you know, like he, he felt, so I'm like, what the hell are you talking about? You have this access to this student. I can't just go up there and make a song like, like it's too daunting. It's too. Yeah. It's like, I, he felt so intimidated by all the amazing gear that he had access to that coming down to.

Yeah. Flooding studio like was freeing. It felt, it let the pressure off of like, oh, I don't need to make something good. I can just make whatever I want. You know? And so I actually feel like that was really true. Like when people, you know, you buy, you buy some fancy piece of equipment and actually it's the opposite effect.

It's like, you should never, ever. Spend the money to, you know, if you don't know whether or not you're going to do the thing, buy the cheapest thing possible, use your phone. Like don't like, don't, spend any money on anything cause you don't need it. And it's only gonna like. Intimidate you. Yeah.

And in my experience too, it usually complicates everything working as well.

Right, right. Cause it's more complicated. There's more things to worry about, you know, buy, if you buy like a nice DSLR camera or something to shoot with, then you gotta like learn all about white balance and like rhino and how to do stuff like that versus your phone does all that automatically.

It's like. Yeah, totally. Well, Jonathan, I, there are so many golden gems that you have dropped throughout this. Um, I'm excited to, to rewatch and relisten, we'll end here. If, if you met someone who was someone that you were going to put on this community board that you're working on, they're also doing the song a day thing.

they love what you're doing, and they're just a couple of chapters behind your life. What would be your biggest advice to that many Jonathan?

it's funny. Cause when I meet people like that, I'm always excited to learn from them. You know, I'm always excited to learn like you know, cause, cause like I was saying a lot of these younger people, they just have, they have a different, totally different perspective on it.

My biggest advice always is like just to, not to try really hard, to not be too hard on yourself and like, and go really easy, especially if you're trying to do something every day. Be super easy on yourself. Give yourself lots of leeway. Give yourself super tons amount of room to just do it and let it be.

And not, not worried too much. that's my advice in general is not work. Just don't worry too much.

I love that. Like coupling of work hard and don't worry. Yeah. That's it.

Yeah. Awesome. Well, thanks again, Jonathan. Thanks everybody for tuning in live or on the replay, we'll make sure that we're linking up, uh, Jonathan's website so you can learn more. If you want to have him do your podcast, they have a song like I have done. Uh, you won't be disappointed and, uh, that's it for this week. I'll see you guys next time.