

The Tim Smal Show – 24 August 2015 transcript

Simon van Gend, a singer-songwriter in Cape Town, talks about his new record Suffer Well.

Tim Smal (host): It's Simon van Gend on Assembly Radio with "Be My Echo", a song off his new record "Suffer Well". Simon van Gend is a songwriter from Cape Town, South Africa and between February 2014 and February 2015 he challenged himself to write a song every week for a year. Each week he posted a brand new song to his blog until all 52 were released into the world wide web. On completion of this mammoth task, he connected with Johannesburg-based artist Sanette Stegman, who took on her own challenge to make an ink drawing for each of these songs. Each illustration is inspired by the stories and the mood they invoke and include a line of the lyrics. At the same time Simon and his introspective indie folk-rock band called 'Simon and the band apart' has teamed up with producer Chris Tuck to record the best of the blog songs for a new album. And this will all come together at a joint exhibition opening and album launch on the 3rd of September at the Youngblood gallery in Bree Street, Cape Town, as part of the First Thursday initiative. Each illustration will be box-framed with the CD of that song and the event will feature a live performance by the band of the songs on the new album.

And we are very privileged today to have Simon live in the studio. How you doing today Simon?

Simon van Gend (guest): Yeah, I'm good thanks.

Tim: Thanks for joining us.

Simon: It's my pleasure.

Tim: Right, well let's talk about this new album. Obviously it's been a long time coming, you've been working really hard at it. Let's go back to the beginning, the genesis of the project and talk about how you came up with the idea.

Simon van Gend (guest): Okay. Well I actually gave a talk on this the other day. I don't know if you know these 'Pecha Kucha' talks, in fact they have them here at The Assembly usually, but this one was in the city hall. And so if I end up sounding like I'm giving a Pecha Kucha talk it's 'cos I memorized this stuff last week. So it started with something that... I don't know if you know the podcast "This American Life", well it's a radio show in the States and Ira Glass is the guy who presents it. And I heard an interview with him and he was talking about becoming a writer and what makes people become writers and what they go through. And basically he talks about this thing he calls 'the gap' and he says that when people set out to become artists, the thing that inspires them is that they have good taste. So they know what great art is, and they love it, and they wanna be able to do it - they want to be able to emulate that great art. And so they set out on their journey and start creating. And the first thing they realise [is], because they know what great art is and they can tell the difference between good and bad art, it immediately becomes apparent to them that there is this huge gap between the art that they are creating and the art they are aspiring to create. And basically they realise that 'they suck' and because that's such an unpleasant feeling, what happens to a lot of people is that they give up right at the beginning of the journey thinking that the ability to make that great art is some god-given talent that they just don't have. But what Ira Glass explains in this interview is that the only

way you can close that gap, is by putting in the hours and doing the work. So I basically wanted to put that to the test and see what would happen if I found a way to make myself work really hard at my songwriting. But I knew that it was going to be hard to discipline myself and I needed some clever trick to force myself to work hard. And that's where I came up with this concept of 'a song a week' and the trick is to go public - the minute you tell everybody you gonna do something and go onto Facebook and tell your friends, then if you don't follow through with that you gonna end up looking really bad and that was the whole idea of setting up the blog, announcing it on Facebook and then I basically couldn't back out of it and it forced me to carry through with the process, even though it was incredibly stressful. And when I was in the middle of it I wish'd I hadn't done it - there was no way I could not do it 'cos I would have looked stupid. So that was how - what got me into it and how I managed to do it.

Tim: So you had to get a 'pro' SoundCloud account to enable you to upload all those hours of audio.

Simon: Exactly, yes. That's what I realised about halfway through when I started running out of space.

Tim: Alright, so you essentially wrote a song a week and uploaded it onto SoundCloud for an entire year. So what was it like in the first month or so? Did it flow quite easily? When did it start to get difficult for you?

Simon: No, it was difficult from the beginning - it never got harder or more difficult in a general way. There were weeks where it was harder and there were some weeks where I would just write the song without even really trying. It's like that, you know, sometimes you'll really have to work hard for that song and it won't end up being such a great song even. And sometimes it'll just happen, it'll kind of fall out of you and you'll think "Oh, that must be a rubbish song 'cos it was much too easy to write." And then you play it to people and you realise "Actually no, that was a good one." One of the great things about the whole process was that you end up with a lot of songs, so you can't really control when a song is gonna be a good song. All you can do is write the song and find out later if it was a good one or not. And writing a lot of songs means there's more likely to be good ones. So for example, I heard this interview once with Beck on another podcast I love to listen to called 'All Songs Considered' - I don't know if you guys know that podcast, it's an NPR show. And Bob Boilen, who's the host said to Beck "I don't believe you've ever written a bad song". And Beck said "No, I've written plenty of bad songs - it's just no-one ever hears them. But to write the good ones you got to write the bad ones." And that's really what I discovered. [If] you mass produce in this way, you're gonna end up with lots of good ones.

And also, if you go into a studio to record an album - say you've got 15 to 20 songs, which is kinda what I would have done in the past, it means you're gonna end up putting songs on the album that maybe you're not entirely sure should go on. But in this case because I had 52 to choose from, it meant [that] I didn't have to compromise at all on that - on the quality of which songs ended up on the album. I mean, I really feel like every single song is like a strong song, you know. And yeah, I mean basically I've got to do this for every album that I ever make from now on because there's no going back. I've seen how well this works.

Tim: And so, essentially you are living proof of that concept that creating a body of work really does pay off, in [the] sense of being a creative and trying to get [those] good quality songs out there. You have to keep producing a whole massive of body of work, that's the

only way that you get to the end goal.

Simon: I guess, yeah. You know, and also writing a lot of songs gives you leeway to mess around with crazy ideas, 'cos if one idea doesn't work, it doesn't matter, 'cos there gonna be so many other songs to choose from in the end. So I started just taking a chance and writing songs about things that I've never written about, you know. I mean, I wrote songs about climate change, and I - I've got a song there called 'Suffer Well' which became the title track, which when I wrote I thought, "This is a helluva heavy thing to write a song about - should I really be going so deep into this thing?" But I thought, "No, what the hell, you know - there's so many songs that I've got to play with; I can just write the thing in and take a chance on it, you know." And very often the ones I did take a chance on ended up being the better ones, which is quite interesting.

Tim: It must have been a very interesting experience though, looking at 52 songs that you've written and then deciding which are the ones that you want to choose for the album because with so many songs - and an album normally being, what - 10 to 15 songs - that's a massive reduction of the songs. So let's talk about that process of actually choosing the ones that appeared on the album.

Simon: Well, that's very easy to answer. All we did was, we got all our friends... [*rambling*]

There's a bunch of people we know that love the music, that we could trust with their opinions - some fans, some friends. And there were most probably - I don't know, about 10 or so people, that we got to make lists of which songs they'd like to hear on an album. And all I did was, I got them to make A-lists and B-lists. And then anything that was on a A-list, got two points, anything that was on a B-list, got one point. And then I just added up the points and made a new list, based on those lists. And that's how we worked out which [songs] were gonna be on the album. But there was still a little bit of leeway - I mean there was one song which didn't make that list with my drummer Ross insisted be on [the album] 'cos it's his favourite. You know, things like that.

Tim: So you actually relied, essentially, on your friends all your fans, if you will.

Simon: Well, I generally do, you know. I've got such a hectic internal critic that it's very hard for me to actually appreciate my own music until someone else tells me, "Okay, that's a good song", 'cos that critic in me has destroyed that song for me in that way. Like... it's hard to explain. I kinda tend to run my own work down so hard and it's really something I need to do something about 'cos it's a big obstacle to the creative process. But in fact, that's really why it was necessary for me to do something like a song a week because it forced me to finish the songs, despite what that [internal critic says]. You know, the thing Ira Glass said, "that feeling of I suck" - well, I mean, that's essentially what "writer's block" is, I think, in my case at any rate. It's like you start writing a song and then there's this voice in your head saying, "This song sucks. You suck. You're an imposter. You're not a real artist. Who you kidding?" And that voice, for whatever reason, I don't know where it comes - from probably some rubbish from my past, you know. But having a weekly deadline meant I couldn't let that voice stop me because - I don't have a choice.

And so it became very clear to me that writer's block is really just the fear of making bad art. So you just carry on writing no matter what and that's the trick for me, is to just keep doing the job. It's like: "I know how to do it. I can do it." And it doesn't require that I be feeling fantastic about the song, although that helps and that's definitely a fuel that keeps you going. But you can also keep going just by keeping going and that really worked, you

know.

Tim: And did you find that as you did “keep going”, that that voice got softer over time – that critical voice? Or did you find it was always kind of there?

Simon: No, it was always there. I mean, that voice is to do with unconscious stuff that's not gonna change just because you keep beating it. If you gonna fix that you need to go to therapy or something. It's like... that's what I think.

Brian Bohlin (co-host): I'm very familiar with that voice.

Tim: Yeah, I think songwriters or artists are familiar with that voice. I mean, I know from my own perspective when I've tried to write songs, I always feel, “This is not a great song. This is...” [rambling] There's so many different things you can think. “Oh, this sounds like something else. The lyrics are weak. The melody is average...”

Simon: Yeah, but you're learning something. No matter how good the song ends up being, by sitting there and plowing through the process of finishing the song, trying your best every time - you're learning something. So even - it might be a song that's not so good, you know, [it] doesn't matter. You're on that journey up the mountain to where, you know, where the great songs are.

Tim: Exactly. I mean, that was the whole idea behind 'the body of work', is that you're only gonna write your best songs if you produce a big body of work, 'cos how else are you gonna know - how you are gonna be able to differentiate [between the songs]?

Simon: And also you're learning new things along the way. Every song I wrote, I learnt something: I learnt a new turn of phrase or I learnt a new way to sing over that chord progression, you know - or a new way to find an idea. I discovered a great trick for finding song ideas when I really had no ideas. In fact, the song 'Suffer Well'... I found - I almost think I shouldn't say this 'cos it's supposed to be some 'mystical thing' where you find ideas for songs, but I was... I had this guitar part that I really liked and I thought, “Okay, I've gotta write a song this week”, and I had no idea. So I went onto... I just started... you know, this thing called 'Stumble-Upon' where you just, it just throws random websites at you. And it landed me on the quotations website and there was a quotation by Muhammad Ali and he said that “he hated every minute of his training” But, you know, he just didn't enjoy being in the gym - he hated it. But he knew that if he wanted to be a champion, he had to suffer that.

So this is a quotation about suffering and I thought, “Hang on - that's great. What other quotations are there gonna be on this website about suffering?” So I just typed 'suffering' in the search bar, and it threw up all these amazing quotations by Dostoevsky and Keats and Nietzsche. So I just basically collected the quotes I liked and started writing a song based on those quotes and some of my own ideas. But there's a great way to find song ideas - go to a quotes website and start reading quotes until you find somebody who said something that resonates with you and would make a good song. There's one idea - that's one trick I learnt. And I learnt that by doing the 'song-a-week' – I wouldn't have learnt it any other way. But, you know, there's lots of tricks.

Tim: Yeah, I actually remember chatting to you at... where were we - 'House Of Machines' a couple months back and you're giving me some tips on songwriting. And I just remember saying – well, you saying that “You have to come up with an idea and then you can

brainstorm different ideas that are related to that”.

Simon: There's two ways I've got of writing songs, that I also kinda discovered in the process, was: The first is where you start with an idea. So you look for an idea, like that, like 'suffer well' - you hunt for an idea and you just stay on the lookout everywhere you go, things people say. You know, often you'll hear a song and you'll go, “Wow, that's something I think all the time, but I never thought of writing a song about it”. So these things are always passing through our minds, but we never catch them. So you're always on the lookout for ideas. And then when you find an idea, then there's that method that I explained, where it was just something I learnt on a songwriting course that I did online last year through Berkeley in Boston, I think. There are these free online courses you can do - the website was 'Coursera' and there you can find hundreds of these online courses about anything from universities all over the world. But anyway, so this was a songwriting course and the method they describe is: You start with an idea and you start brainstorming keywords around that idea. Say your song was 'suffer well', you could say “pain”, you can say “heartache”, you know, you could just brainstorm ideas. And then you write down these keywords and you make sure that your ten keywords don't rhyme with each other - that's very important, because what you gonna do next is go to your rhyming dictionary and find as many words as you can that rhyme with each keyword. So you start with your first keyword and you just start finding rhymes - you look that keyword up in your dictionary...

Tim: So if “pain” was a keyword...

Simon: Yeah, then you would see “rain” and you'd think, “Mmm, could 'rain' be in this song? Yeah, well, 'rain' is a great metaphor for sadness - I'll stick that on my list.”

“Gain” - okay, obviously 'no pain, no gain' - that's a word that might appear. And the great thing about that process is that each time you see a new word on that list in the rhyming dictionary and you're thinking, “Could that be in a song?” that word will often get you thinking in a way that you wouldn't be thinking about an idea for that song, because it might be a word which you'd never have dreamed of putting in the song, but suddenly there it is and it suggested a line about “stain”, you know, about 'the stain you left on my heart', for example. So each word sparks an idea and it's an 'idea generator', that method.

So you end up with this sheet of ten keywords - or how ever many, more-or-less ten keywords and as many rhymes as you can for each keyword and then that's what you use to build your verses. You just got all these words you can start chucking in verses. You can use them as end-of-line rhymes or internal rhymes, you know, they're all there. So that's the one method.

Tim: And I used that, I actually wrote a song and I saw it all the way through. So just so that you know, I've been taking your advice.

Simon: So that's the one way of writing a song: You start with an idea and you build a song up around the idea. And the other way is to just have no idea. And you're playing your guitar, you've got a feeling and then you just start writing whatever-the-hell comes outta your head. And trust that your subconscious can create something. You know, every night you go to sleep and you dream and your mind effortlessly creates these incredible things.

Brian: I'm literally... I'm about to lose my skull from nodding so much in agreement

because... Look, I can vouch, first of all, about the whole 'just nothing' - you know, getting a song [out of nowhere]... I mean, I'll sometimes sit with my guitar for a few hours, without even noticing, you know what I mean? Because the time just flies by. And then all of a sudden, you start playing something, you get an idea in your head and you start talking. And then it just works out.

Simon: Exactly. To me, those are the best songs, 'cos they're the most honest in a way, you know, it's like... You can construct a song using your left brain, but to me, that's not the interesting part of the brain. The interesting part of the brain is the right [part], is the part of your brain that creates dreams at night. And those are the songs that I love the most. I'd rather hear a Bob Dylan song like 'Tambourine Man' or whatever, where the lyrics are just crazy and they don't have any logical sense - than a well-structured country and western song that tells a specific story. Although I love them both, which is why I try and write both kinds of songs. But always my favourite, the one that set me free when I hear it, is the Bob Dylan-kind, where there this crazy, dreamy story, that isn't really a story, that's just a bunch of wild images.

Brian: Where everything that's said in the song is almost just another message, you know. It's all emotional... it's not like it's calculated.

Simon: It's unconscious stuff. Yeah, it's stuff that makes you feel and allows you to dream your own dream on top of it. It allows you to think your own meaning, you know - it's not prescribing a story.

Brian: It's almost like the difference between constructing a song and like, expressing a song. You know what I mean? It's two different things. It's two different skills really. They're both admirable. If you can build up a great song just from calculations...

Simon: Yeah and it's not 'black and white', I mean, the one method always involves some of the other method. So that's the great thing about being able to do both, is you can actually use both in the same song.

Brian: Synergy.

Simon: Yeah, you know, often I'll be just doing the method of writing without thinking - you know, the 'unpremeditated method' with just letting stuff come out of my brain. And then suddenly I'll go "Wow, hang on - that's a good idea." That song you just played 'Be My Echo' was one of those - I just started writing. And then for whatever reason, I just started singing "be my echo". I didn't have any idea why that came out of my head and suddenly that became a great focus for the song.

Tim: That's incredible. Very, very interesting. Well, why don't we take a listen to one of your songs Simon? You've got a beautiful Larrivée guitar here today. I'm a big Larrivée fan - made in Canada by John Larrivée and the [Larrivée] family. So we gonna have a live performance now from Simon van Gend playing a track off his new record 'Suffer Well', which I mentioned is being released this coming Thursday - no, not this Thursday - Thursday a week... 3rd of September. So we're gonna have a live performance now from Simon. What is the name of this track?

Simon: It's called 'Meerkat and Cobra' and this is actually the last song on the album.

[*Simon performs the song*]

Tim: It's the exceptionally talented singer-songwriter Simon van Gend live with the track called "Meerkat and Cobra" from his latest record "Suffer Well" which comes out September 3rd. Cool, well [it was] a real privilege to have you in the studio today.

Simon: Thanks very much for having me.

Tim: You're a really awesome singer-songwriter. And if people wanna get hold of your other albums, they're all...

Simon: Yeah, they can all be found via the website. There's a link to Itunes and there's also... if you go to the website simonvangend.bandcamp.com – all the albums are up there. Otherwise, just e-mail me and I can always make a plan to get an actual physical copy to anyone that wants one.

Tim: Awesome.