

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 122: STEPHEN NELSON

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption.

Many of you know that two of my greatest loves are books and music, so I love any opportunity to speak to and learn from authors and musicians. Last week, we had the chance to talk to fiction author Julie Berry and this week we're speaking to pianist, composer and producer Stephen Nelson. Stephen and I first met when one of the groups he produces music for - GENTRI - and I were both speaking on an inspirational women's tour called Time Out for Women. As part of their performance, Stephen would take two song suggestions from the audience, and on the spot would create a new musical composition incorporating both melodies. As a pianist myself, I was so taken with his skill and musicianship, I've wanted to speak with him ever since.

Whitney: Do you remember when you first started playing the piano?

Stephen: I get asked that a lot. Uh, and the answer I always give is I've played the piano since... ever since I had fingers. I- I don't remember ever not playing. In fact, I used to get grounded from the piano, which was the best way to punish me if I did something. Uh, and instead of saying, you know, "You're- you're not allowed to go outside and play with friends," because then I'd be inside with the piano, um, my mom would say, "You- you're grounded from the piano for an hour, and you have to go knock on Scott Tucher's door to see if he is there. And if he's there, you have to play with him." Which would not have been as fun as playing the piano.

Whitney: (laughs) That's how your mom grounded you? You had to go outside and play with someone else. That's pretty funny.

Stephen: Yeah.

Whitney: So you don't remember starting to play the piano, but what are some memories of- of music that you liked when you were young?

Stephen: My oldest two sisters would wake up early before school and they would, um, practice their songs and then as I would listen to them, I would just get so excited about what they were playing. I thought it was so cool. So when they would go to school, I would go onto the piano

and I would start figuring it out by ear. And then it came to my attention that it was possible to sight read. I knew how to read music a little bit because I took about six months to a year of piano lessons when I was seven. I had enough of the foundation to be like, this is a sharp, this is a flat, that's a treble clef. Got it.

My mom made a pact with me that if I would play them, I can get as many piano books as I wanted and I played anything I could get my hands on. And then my sister and I would play duets, which was a fun way to kind of make, um, to mix it up and, and I was fascinated by the fact that two people are playing at once. It was like a mini orchestra, which is eventually what I would love to, to compose.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephen: So I think that was the beginnings of everything.

Whitney: That's so interesting. So you're, you're self-taught, you are completely self-taught. Fascinating. And not only by ear, but reading music. So when did you compose your first piece of music?

Stephen: When I was seven or eight, you know, somewhere around there, um, I played, I started playing this melody. I started with the left hand. And I started accompanying with the right hand, which is totally backwards to where, what is an eight to me now? Um, and the melody sounded like bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump. I was kind of like this boxy sounding thing, but I thought it was so exciting to, to be able to extract something from my head and put it into my fingers and onto the piano.

Whitney: All right, so you get into high school and you start thinking, I could actually do this for a career. Was there an event or something where you now playing piano for music where people hiring you to play at weddings and things where you started to realize you could make money doing this?

Stephen: I was at a Christmas concert. As I listened to "Still, Still, Still," an arrangement by Mack Wilberg, I, it just like flooded me this, this illumination of this is what I'm going to do the rest of my life.

I just knew that there was something was going to happen to make this possible and I was just going to keep my head down, keep writing, keep arranging, keep accompanying, keep doing anything I can with music because eventually something was going to stick and, and uh, I'm lucky to say it did.

Whitney: That's so exciting. So you're like 15, 16 years old and you're like, "Okay, this is going to work. I'm going to make this happen."

Stephen: (laughs) This is the rest of my life.

Whitney: All right. So did you study in college or did you, what did you do in college?

Stephen: I studied what was called media music at the time, which is now called commercial music.

Um, that, that was a little hard for me. Even though I really enjoyed my experience and got a lot out of it in school, um, I, after the first semester or two I realized, I think what I'm looking for is going to be in, in, in, out, in the world, out in the real world you could say.

That was my mindset at that point. I thought, how can I get into the industry as soon as possible? Because I think that's where I'm going to find what I'm looking for.

And Stephen did start to find the opportunities he was looking for. His deep love was in orchestral film scores because they combined his interest in story and his talent for using music to bring that story to life. That desire to create film music came in an unexpected way when he started working with three members of what is now known as GENTRI.

Whitney: How did the four of you end up working together? Let's, let's start there.

Stephen: They all sang together, uh, and play different roles in musical theater, particularly, uh, the musical *Les Mis*. Um, so then afterwards they thought, wow, this would be fun thing to do full time. We should, we should make a group.

So they, they banded together and they said, "Okay, who do we know that get, can produce and write and arrange?" So they called me and said, "Hey, we're thinking of starting a boy band. What do you think? Do you want to be our producer?" And I thought, "How do I get rid of these guys as fast as possible?"

Whitney: (laughs)

Stephen: This is not what I want! Like this is, and it was musical theater. Their original idea was - we want to be the musical theater guys. They were using what was familiar to them. Right? One of my jobs is to simply decide what is the public going to want to consume? What is not? And musical theater is, is an interesting beast because there are world famous musical theater stars, like Idina Menzel or Kristen Chenowith.

But what's interesting about, uh, those musical theater stars is that people like them the most when they're doing what made them famous, whether it's a *Wicked* song or whether it's a *Frozen* song, um, that is when people really tune in. And then when you hear originals or different other arrangements, most people tune back out 'cause they're just waiting for what, what is familiar to them. I thought, there's no way this is going to work. People are going to love you because they've seen you. That's not enough people for us to make a career out of this.

I was ready to cut the cord as soon as possible, but they're very ambitious and very convincing. So I stuck around just trying to bridge that gap for them and when I heard them sing together I thought "Well, too bad it's not going to work because you guys sound fantastic - especially together."

And then, there was a point where we had a discussion as a group and someone, something sparked and the idea of cinematic pop kind of was born for us. And once that happened, it's like the stars aligned for me and it all made sense. And I thought, I know exactly how this is going to work. I know how, we know how to position you guys know, we know how to make this new and fresh.

Whitney: What is cinematic pop?

Stephen: Cinematic pop to us is the fusion of, of film score- like orchestration. So this is a very big difference between classical orchestra and John Williams. Whether it be *Jaws*, uh, soundtrack music or um, uh, *Harry Potter* or *Indiana Jones* or *Lord of the Rings*, things like that. It's a very different flavor. It's a lot more contemporary and a lot more, um, uh, "hooky," I guess you could say. So there's that style of orchestra and we fuse that with the pop stylings of a contemporary three part harmony with, with the, with the three tenors in GENTRI.

It ends up being a, a very, whether epic experience or tear, (laughs) it makes me want to cry as well. And that's our goal. We want to make people feel things and not just kind of Vibey and fun.

Whitney: So, um, one of the things I'd love to do is for people who haven't heard of GENTRI before, and I think many, probably 95% of my listeners haven't. So that's awesome for you is what's one clip that you can tell us about that would be a good introduction to them that we could include?

Stephen: Uh, there's a song called "Dare," which was our very first release. Um, and I think as a group, we all agree that nothing has captured our sound more perfectly than that song.

[Audio clip of "Dare" – Full recording at <https://youtu.be/hiTwY1nQjCE>]

Whitney: Talk to me about the collaborative process. When you now have an idea, what does that look like?

Stephen: With most artists, I sit down with the artist and I just have the monologue say, okay, what-

Whitney: Uh-huh.

Stephen: What do you want to say to the world? Oh, well I want to say this and this is, I want the music to feel like this and I want this vibe to, to come across and, and I want to express this through a different lens, maybe using this or maybe using that. And so, so I get them just to go and I ask them questions to keep them spiraling into that, that monologue so that I can glean all the information I need out of them. I've always felt like, why didn't all I, I've, I've learned that one of my, my, um, strengths as a collaborator in music.

Whitney: Superpowers?

Stephen: We'll call superpower. I like that. (laughs) One of my superpowers, it sounds weird to say, um, is, is that, well, it's actually one of my weaknesses too - that I have everything I need to write the music that I want to write. It's not hard for me to pull it out of my head. It's not hard right? It's not hard for me to arrange it on the piano or in the orchestra or through synth or through a country lens or through an R&B lens. Like I love exploring any kind of sound because all of it is exciting to me.

But I found that I have nothing that I want to say to the world. I just don't care. But the music is just oozing out of my soul. And so I'm always looking for opportunities to find somebody who has something want to say. And when I collaborate with them, that's where I think the most special things come from with the things that I'm a part of.

Whitney: That's-

Stephen: Because then-

Whitney: ... fascinating.

Stephen: Yeah.

Whitney: Keep going this is fascinating.

Stephen: It's weird to say out loud, to say like, "I am an empty soul I don't care about that. I don't want to say anything to the world." But I find that artists, uh, most of the time they are desperately wanting to say something to the world and they often don't have all the tools to do that, to piece something together so that it crystallizes it into something that's palatable and digestible for the, for wide mass of people. And so they have all the passion, they have all the art, artistic artistry I guess.

Um, they have the vision, they have everything except for my skill set. So, and I have everything except for their skillset. One thing I love to do is take this big mess of things that all sound wonderful and distill it down to what I feel is the most important aspects of it.

And then when I give it back to them and say, "Okay, is this what you're saying?" Even if it's just verbally at the beginning and they say, "Yeah, that's basically what it's saying. And also this and also this." And so then we go back and forth until it's down to its purest form. And then I say, okay, everything you've said feels kind of like this to me. And I play on them, play on the piano when it kind of feels like, and then we go from there, whether you, whether it's spot on and you know, they start crying because they're passionate artists and they like it happened or we're not there yet. And they say, "Oh, that's so close. Maybe a little more of this."

So it, it really is this back and forth, um, exciting process for me. I absolutely love it.

Whitney: Yeah. That's amazing. So, so if I understand correctly, like if I could sing then, I would say let's do it on the spot. And part of me is like, is Macy, are you still on the phone? Are you on the line? Macy? She is not.

Macy: I regret saying that I'm on the line. Yes, I am.

Whitney: Well, Stephen. You know, Macy sings, right?

Stephen: What?

Whitney: Did you know Macy sings [crosstalk 00:25:38]?

Stephen: Let's hear it.

Whitney: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. [crosstalk 00:25:41] she so sings.

Stephen: I was waiting for you [crosstalk 00:25:45]-

Macy: Here's the funny thing. No, here's the funny thing though. I have been listening to you, Stephen and I, um, I used to perform for Time Out for Women before I worked for Time Out for Women, which is how I, I met you previously and which is a tour that at all over the country. And, um, and what you just said about working with people and knowing that like, I don't necessarily have something in particular that I want to say, but I know how to help them say what they need to say. Um, I do that in different ways with the work that I do. And so that was actually so cool for me to hear you say that.

Because I have felt like though I sing and I love to sing and I love telling stories and I love, I've never wanted to write, I've never wanted to necessarily have a huge Broadway career, even

though that was a path that was open to me. I care most about helping other people, um, share what they need to share.

Whitney: Okay.

Stephen: Okay. I love that.

Whitney: So we're gonna, we're gonna just do a little, I know, it's awesome. We're gonna just do a little experiment here. So, so Stephen, let's say Macy came to you and said, I've got this idea, I need to do this song, you would just have her just start talking to you about it and then you would repeat back to her what she was saying. And then after that you would put it into music. So Macy, I am so putting you on the spot and we can completely cut this out if you want, but Macy, what's something on your brain, maybe something about your kids? And I just want to see a little bit of the process of the back and forth of what this looks like or feels like, or sounds like?

Macy: Okay, that that I can talk about.

Whitney: Okay go.

Macy: Um, so we're in a season with my kids where, um, I feel like time is going by so quickly and I, I worry that I have not taught them the things that I need to teach them. That my son is 12 years old and I have six summers left with him. I just want to make sure that I'm, you know, juggling all these roles that I have in the best way I can and making sure I'm there for him. So I don't know. He's very musical as well. He plays the drums and he sings and can do both at the same time and plays percussion at school and plays the piano and um, and really relates to story. And so that if I, if I ever could write a song, it would be something about him.

Stephen: Okay, what would be, what would be your worst fear with, with, with him?

Macy: My worst fear?

Stephen: And your greatest hope?

Macy: I guess my biggest fear is him not having a deep understanding of who he is and the how, um, just how great he is - like everyone is - but particularly that message for him.

He's in middle school, so he's very susceptible to outside voices right now. And needs a lot of external validation. Um, but my greatest hope for him would be, I guess obviously the opposite of that. That he could lean into who he is and, and how he is, and um, feel like he can do whatever he chooses to do with his life.

Stephen: That's really cool. Um, sorry, I'm writing as I go. I can't help it. Even though we're not going to write a song, (laughs) I kind of feel like I have to do this because this is my process. Uh, do anything. So for, for this, uh, song, we'll say that, then we're going to write-

Macy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephen: What do you want it to feel like? 'Cause I, I'm seeing, uh, you, your, your worst fear with him and your greatest hope, they match a lot in that you just want him to know who he is.

Macy: Right.

Stephen: Have, have, have a pure, an unfiltered view of his worth and what he's capable of and where he's going in life and what is available to him. Is that true?

Macy: Yeah.

Stephen: Is that an exciting message or is this a more somber kind of fe-, when you talk about this, what do you feel?

Macy: I think it's a super exciting message because I think the fact that we have the ability to choose the lives that we have, um, is our greatest, is one of the greatest things anybody can learn. Um, and I think there's a lot of joy in that message. And um, and that's the kind of music he resonates with anyway because he's a drummer. Like something that, something that has a, um, a beat to it and um, and is joyful. It would remind me of him and who he is, if that helps.

Stephen: It's cool, yeah. So it'd be a super exciting message. Uh, some of it is empowering. I would love to incorporate something about drumming. Um, if that's something that's very specific to him that would resonate with him. Um, whether it is, we put drums in there and there are a huge part of the arrangement, um, and we based everything around that or it could be more of a lyrical, uh, nod where we can put somewhere in the hook...

Macy: Yeah.

Stephen: Um, beat like a, you know, how like "don't skip a beat" that like little phrases like that could, that could, we could twist to tie into that, but it wouldn't be so on the nose. That could be a fun thing to explore.

Macy: Right, right.

Whitney: Would you have her sing at this point too, if there's any melodies or things that are coming into her head?

Stephen: It kind of fluctuates. Sometimes that's all we do for a couple hours. We just sit down and more questions, more questions. It usually turns into a therapy sessions and there's tears and we're all kind of there and then, but the, I think that's that vulnerability and that honesty is the only way to get down to, to something that's real. I'm a huge, but this isn't what you asked, but it's my soapbox, so I've got to say it. I'm a huge, huge, huge believer in, uh, if, if you want to write music that touches people, that people connect with, you have to have, right? You have to write music that has a heartbeat.

And music that has a heartbeat has to be real. It has to be vulnerable. It has to be authentic. It can't be filtered through the lens of originality. It can't be filtered through the lens of current and cool or trendy. Uh, I made the big mistake early in my career at sitting down and wanting to write a song, and everyone said, "It's got to be catchy." Everything everyone said, "It's got to be clever with the lyrics." Everyone said it's got to be a repetitive because that's what makes things tick.

So they gave me all the mechanics of what makes a good song, but the mechanics is not where you find the good songs. You can use that to dissect great songs. But that is not the birthplace of great songs in my opinion. So I'd use the mechanics to do that and every time I'd finish a song, I would, I would scratch my head being like, this is catchy and people are responding to it. They're being like, yeah, that's a really good song. Good job. I really liked that. But I can tell that they're not, it's not doing anything for them and they're not attaching their soul to it, if we're going to be dramatic, that's, this is how I, my language,

Whitney: I like that. I like that.

Stephen: Uh, and so they don't have anything to sink their teeth into as a listener. And so at best they can just say, "That was fun. I really good job. You're, you've really, I like that. You should write another one." But then the songs that I threw away the desire to be catchy or cool or contemporary or trendy or modern or original or anything else that is that that sounds like that which is manufactured and manipulated in the name of, to make a buck, or in the name of to get exposure.

And if it's anything other than to just give somebody something to, to connect to and hold onto. It always has blown up in my face. And maybe that's not how it has worked for other people. But for me, there's only one way to write music and that is to get down to the nuts and bolts of something that is so raw that when you sing about it, it has its own gravitational force and it pulls people toward it. And then it's kind of like a person in my opinion. You, you said Whitney, that I can go off. I'm going to go off. (laughs) It's uh-

Whitney: I love it. Keep going.

Stephen: It's kind of, it's kind of like people, you know, the people who are re-, I mean everyone's in their own phase, in their own journeys of "who am I" and sometimes a while we're trying to figure out who we are and if we're okay with what we are and maybe that process that uh, uh, uh, that your son was going through. Um, I think that that is something that is a human thing that we'll probably have till the day we die. You can kind of tell if someone is saying "I need a mask to hide what is deep inside of me until I figure out if I'm okay with it."

And that mask is the mechanical, empty side of things. So when you talk to them at best, you can say there were nice, it seems like a really good person and I'm sure there, that'd be a nice friend. You know, you can't really draw from anything because every, all your connection of the offering of your soul kind of hits the emptiness of that mask until they're ready to present who they are, when they're, when they're okay with it or whatever that process looks like.

But then we go to the other side of the coin. And when you talk to somebody who is so connected and they're so still and grounded with who they are, um, that they become infectious to you and all you want to do is relive your experiences with him. So you're, someone texts you and you hope it's them. And then when they call, you're so excited because you know that it's going to be this amazing conversation and you're probably going to cry together or you're probably going to be, have the best time ever. But either way, like you, both people are so open that the connection just sparks constantly. And that's this, that the, the on the human side of us that is so exciting to, to be near and you crave it as humans, right?

So I, I'm a believer that the same thing happens with music. And other things. But for me, music, um, when you hear a song that is a "mask song" because it was written in the name of something empty, um, and, and to me they're empty, you know, uh, to other people that may not be, but it to write something "to be cool" or "to be original," that that to me is pretty hollow. When you hear a song that is connected and it draws from a real place that, that, that you can connect to inside of you, it's almost like you're interacting with someone, something that is living and breathing and has a soul and has a heartbeat.

And so what, my favorite part of the whole process is to, to find out that the songs that I'm a part of writing, they go out into the world and they're having their own separate experiences with people that I've never met. The song is living its own life and it's connecting with people and it's healing people or it's, it's doing, softening their hearts or opening them up or helping them feel excited or meeting them where they are in their devastation, whatever it is. Like it's like, I made

a song and that song is running around making new friends and connecting with people because the goal is to make it, make it a living, breathing thing.

And then it just like when you, when you, when your favorite song, maybe all your listeners can do that now what is your favorite song? That song probably has a heartbeat and you probably have this gravitational pull that sucks you back to it over and over again because you just want to relive that connection that sparks that, that same thing happens with humans. So there's my soapbox. I love that kind of stuff.

Whitney: Wow. That is so amazing. Okay, so I want to close the loop on this conversation that I pulled Macy into, which I've never done this to her before.

Stephen: Yeah. (laughs)

Whitney: Um, and we had over a hundred podcasts. So Macy, do you have any tune in your head that comes to mind? Just so that it's there?

Macy: Uh, I don't, I wish that I did. Um, I, I, I was just sort of entranced by listening to Stephen talk about that because that's, I very deeply feel that way about art as well. Um, that people sing who they are, whether they play an instrument or sing or not. The purpose of art is to share it with other people and make them happy and give it away. And I don't know how to, how to turn that into a tune, um, other than to say that, um, man, that resonates with me and I could talk about that forever.

Whitney and I were talking actually just before we got on this call. Um, I've been thinking a lot about the difference between talents and gifts. And that a gift to me is something that comes from a deep place that that has a lot to do with your purpose in life. And that if we're lucky, our talents can lead us to the deepest expression of those gifts. And I just think you're a perfect example of that, that this talent to play the piano and sing and express yourself through music, like that's uh, it's leading to that deep expression of what sounds like your ability to mirror back to people what they're feeling and then give it back to them in a form that they recognize and can instantly connect with through the music that you create. And I just think that's really amazing.

Whitney: Yeah [crosstalk 00:39:57]. All right.

Stephen: I like how you worded that. [crosstalk 00:39:58]. I think you have that gift too. (laughs)

Whitney: I liked how both of you, worded it, just for the record. Okay. Macy, I'm going to give you one last chance. You want to sing anything for us right now because I know everybody's like, "How does she, how does her voice sound? What does she sound like?" It could be a super simple one song can be row, row, row your boat. But is there something, will you please sing something?

Macy: Um, I, I don't know what to sing. Um, since you asked for "Row Row, Row Your Boat," I can sing row, row, row your boat, but I do have recordings on iTunes. I do have recordings on iTunes that Whitney is playing the piano for me on. If you are interested and want to search Macy Robison, "[Children will Listen](#)." You can hear Whitney play the piano for me, which I think would be interesting for people and we can include a link to that in the show notes for sure.

Whitney: All right. So Steven, this was really interesting to hear how you collaborate and so basically what you're saying is you'll just have a conversation with them, whether it's GENTRI, whether it's with the other projects that you're working on, and maybe you can just tell us very briefly about

one or two other projects that we're working on. But it's interesting to hear how that collaborative process works and I to just say back to you, and I know Macy just said this, but I want to say it as well were you mentioned, okay, I've got all these tools and I'm an empty vessel and you set out in a self-deprecating way, but I do think it's fascinating how, because you don't feel the need of that, there is some message that you have to get out into the world. As a consequence, you're able to give this gift of all of these talents and this vast, vast tool kit that you have amassed over the course of your life to give, give so many other people expression and what a wonderful gift and collaboration that you can do because you don't have the ego involved. In a way that you might, if you felt like there was also something that you needed to express.

Stephen: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you. I appreciate that.

Whitney: You're welcome. So what's one project that you're working on right now, or you're about to work on that you're excited about?

Stephen: There was a recent project that I worked on with uh, GENTRI where we, uh, it was for Mother's Day, so it's already released. Um, it's a, it's a mashup of "You Say," um, by Lauren Daigle and "Wind Beneath My Wings" by, Bette Midler.

Stephen: And, uh, so what was fun about that one is that we incorporated set, different artists that sounded nothing like GENTRI, which was the goal. So uh, Ryan Innes, Yahosh and Oba Bonner and Ega Michaels, who's the lead singer of Foreign Figures. So we, we wanted them all to be guys so that, you know, as sons, they can sing to their moms from the same perspective.

I did some, uh, research on, uh, what are all their strengths, um, or at least the things that I felt like where their strengths. And then we sat down and uh, started pulling it together. So once everyone kind of had a solo, we realize where the imbalances were. So then we started switching things around and then adding harmonies and then, um, it started turning into something that, that, that I felt was starting to have a heartbeat, which is the only thing I can most concerned about.

So then when it was done, we were really excited. Because then as you go through, um, the high singers get their high moments, you know, cause that's, that's what they're most passionate. That's what they love most. And then the low singers have their low moments and then, um, and then everyone gets to sing parts of the song that, that have a meaning to them. So that was kind of a recent project that we did. That was a fun spin that was very different for GENTRI. Never done anything like that before.

[Audio clip of "You Say/Wind Beneath My Wings" - <https://youtu.be/O2H6aR7losQ>]

Whitney: Excellent. Okay. So just a few more questions as we start to wrap up. So we were talking about mashups and music. So I have a request. Two songs that are really meaningful to me. One is "Do-Re-Mi" and that is a song that when I saw the film *Sound of Music*, I came home and I tried to figure out how to play "Do-Re-Mi" on the piano. Very first song I remember playing. And then the other one is, "Isn't She Lovely," by Stevie Wonder which, um, I first heard when I was in high school, but I've always loved it and when my children were born I played that song repeatedly over and over and over again.

So I would love it if you would do a Mashup of those two songs. That is my request. I am putting a very big, I don't know, \$10,000 dollar in the vending machine of Steven Nelson.

Stephen: (laughs)

Macy: Um, so is that something you would be willing to do?

Stephen: Yeah, I can do that. And you should know that the, those are two songs because I do this a lot in, in, in concerts and I've never gotten either of those songs, so that will be a fun, uh, challenge for me.

[Audio – arrangement of “Isn’t She Lovely” and “Do-Re-Mi” by Stephen Nelson]

Whitney: Two more questions. Who would you like to collaborate with? Who out there in the world would you like? “Oh, I would love to work with that person!”

Stephen: I think the, the first person that comes to mind, although I wouldn't feel worthy, (laughs) uh, is Max Martin. He is, in my opinion, the, is one of the most brilliant mind. Ooh, actually or, okay. Can I give you two? Um-

Whitney: Yeah, but who’s Max Martin before you'd go to the second one.

Stephen: So Max Martin, he, he is the king of pop as far as producers go. He isn't, he, he is a no-name basically, if haven't taken the time to figure out who produced all these amazing, um, smash hits. Um, it, because he, he's kind of a recluse. He doesn't want to, he doesn't want the fame. He doesn't want all the awards. He, he, if you've seen a picture of him, like he looks like he's just some dude like that may have showered that morning. Like he's just, I appreciate him on a lot of levels. Um, but anyway, so he, he has worked with artists from across the board in, in different flavors of pop and also rock and other, other genres and everything he touches turns to gold.

And he is one of the reasons - he hasn't said what I, what I have gleaned from him. Um, but he is one of the reasons why I feel honesty, authenticity and, and something real needs to be a part of something that, that the masses will all connect to, um, because even though he hasn't said it, it's very obvious that that's what he does.

Whitney: Wow.

Stephen: Another person um, that I would add to that I have to add too, because he, he is, um, in a different way, uh, the, the top of my list, I don't think I could put one over the other is Alan Menken and he wrote all of the songs for all of the biggest hits, uh, in, in Disney. So he wrote the film scores and the, the songs. So you can see why I love him 'cause he does film scoring and writes songs, um, for *Little Mermaid*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a *Pocahontas*, uh, *Aladdin*, uh, *Beauty and the Beast*. And I'm trying to think of - all of those Disney classics that if you, if you grew up in my childhood, they were all on the same shelf on the the movies.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephen: Um, all of those, every last song, which is incredible to me. And in every-

Whitney: Wow.

Stephen: In an interview that he said, um, he was asked to describe his music in a sentence and he said, “honest and vulnerable” and, and I was like, "Yes." You know, I, you know, like “Validation!” because that's what it sounds like.

Whitney: Wow. Okay. Love it. All right, so Stephen, where can people find you if they, if they want to look you up and learn more about you? Where's the best place to look?

Stephen: (laughs) Okay, this is the another awkward question because I, I take a card from Max Martin's hand because I, uh, I am, I'm off the radar. I don't have Facebook, I don't have Instagram. I don't have a website. I am, I'm that guy. I just, uh, I've preferred to not be public facing.

Whitney: Second to last question. Penultimate question. If there were a soundtrack, so just songs that we all know to be in the background of your life, what would be three songs that would need to score for your life? Like I told you mine, you know, "Isn't She Lovely?" would be one that I would care about. "Do-Re-Mi" would be one that I care about. What about for you? What are three songs that would definitely have to be part of the, the montage that is Steven Nelson's life?

Stephen: Um, that it really, there really is a hard question, so I'll start with uh, Be Still, My Soul/Guide Me to Thee.

About 11 or 12 years ago, my mom passed away and I was on a religious mission at the time. For various reasons, I chose not to come home, but instead I wanted to send uh, two arrangements home, uh, and dedicate one to my mom and one to my dad when she passed away. Uh, so one, the first one was "Be Still My Soul," which I dedicated to her

[Audio clip of "Be Still My Soul" - <https://youtu.be/-7NezO6VhZU>]

and the other one was "Guide Me to Thee," which I dedicated to him.

[Audio clip of "Guide Me to Thee" - <https://youtu.be/x1o2Xd5foGk>]

Stephen: Those two arrangements I didn't see coming. Um, I didn't sit down and think to myself, I'm going to write, uh, these arrangements that are going to be really meaningful. And I, it didn't, it didn't go that way. It was, it was more organic and unexpected. And I felt like those were kind of gifts from me with, with how hard that trial was for me. I, my, my language is music, music comes out of my ears. It comes out of my heart. Like it's, it's, that's my world and I, I don't think it's a coincidence that that's kind of what I needed to receive to help comfort me at that time. So those two would be my first one. I'm going to squeeze them into one. Uh, uh-

Whitney: 'Cause you like mashups?

Stephen: Because it's all about mashups. (laughs) um, so there's another song, uh, called "Both Sides Now" by Joni Mitchell and the, her original, when she did it in the '60s or '70s, it was fine. I, it's, it's a nice arrangement, but when it was redone in the two thousands or something when she was much, much older, so it just really old woman's voice that's barely holding together in that arrangement. And it's just a soft orchestral backdrop. And it sounds so, like, I believe every word of it. And, uh, with a lot of, um, hard things in my life beyond my mom passing away. That song has had such a strong heartbeat for me personally that I keep coming back to it and it keeps on doing what it has always done for me, which is just this healing feeling where I feel like Joni gets it, and the song gets it. And uh, it, it basically talks about the, the paradoxes of life and how one thing at one moment completely changes and another one and neither are wrong and they're not both fully right either, but that's not the point. And it's just, it's beautiful. So that's "Both sides Now," Joni Mitchell, I hold, I highly recommend that everyone looks it up and it's, it's if it's just her guitar is not the right arrangement, it's her and an orchestra.

So the last one I would say is "The Whisper of a Thrill." Uh, it's a track from *Meet Joe Black* and it's just orchestra. Uh, also one of my greatest loves, uh, and uh, it's, I think it's like 10 to 15 minutes long. It's so long. It's a very end of the movie where everything starts wrapping up. And that's always my favorite part of any movie because then you get all of the, the, the, the most explored emotions in the movie available. It goes through the hunting off quality of one of the

characters into the redeeming qualities of another character, into the heart wrenching qualities of another character. And then they all start combining into one emotion that is so complex that it never gets old to me.

Whitney: Steven Nelson, you have taken us on a thrill of a journey, but it hasn't been a whisper. It's been a lovely, lovely shout. Uh, thank you so much for being with us today.

Stephen: Thank you. This has been so fun. We'll have to do it again. (laughs)

So much of what we talked about is just fascinating to me. But because I love connections between disparate ideas, I can't just leave it there. Listening back to our conversation, there's a lot here on what it takes to be a good collaborator. So here's what I learned.

Number one, **know what your unique strengths are**. In Stephen's case, it's his incredible gift for being able to hear and see melodies almost effortlessly. What's your unique strength? As we've talked about before, sometimes we devalue or talk down our strengths (just like Stephen did for a minute) because they are often gifts or talents that come naturally. We value what we don't do well (our weaknesses) and the things we've overcome. But our strengths are what set us apart and are an important lever of disruption.

Number two, **bring all you have to offer to the table and detach from your ego for the good of the project**. This was striking for me. Stephen – he has this amazing talent. He could be off on his own trying to make a name for himself, but he feels his deepest joy and best use of that talent is in collaborating with others who have a message to share. Which makes him a dream as a collaborator. Is there a project you're working on that you can approach through this lens? Can you take ego out for the good of the project?

Number three - third thing I learned, **remember that whatever you're creating, if it's meant to make a difference in the world - will have a heartbeat and a life of its own for others to experience**. Which by the way is it's own kind of collaboration. It's not for you to keep or hide. The things we create are meant to share. And that can feel vulnerable and scary, but remember what you create may inspire others to create as well.

Practical Tip:

This week, deliberately share something you're working on with other people. You can share it online, on social media, with a coach or colleague or trusted friend. But share it. As Austin Kleon says - Show Your Work. Share it with others.

Thank you for subscribing, listening to and generously sharing the podcast. After talking to Stephen, I realized that when you take time to leave reviews, to reply to our newsletter and let us know how it affects you, in so many ways, this feels like a collaboration between the two of us.

Thank you again to Stephen Nelson for being our guest, for that wonderful mash-up also of "Isn't She Lovely" and "Do Re Mi," thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.