SAMPLE CHAPTER — CHAPTER 4: TENSION

THE MUSIC BUSINESS

Build a Creative Career and Navigate the Industry

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CHAPTER

4

Tension

The first real success arrives.

For me, the first real success was producing and writing songs on a platinum record, and then another, and then a year in which two of my productions reached number one on the same weekly Australian chart at different moments: Shannon Noll's *Learn to Fly* and Paulini's *Angel Eyes*, both top of the ARIA singles chart in the same week, separated only by a data correction that pushed one past the other on a Wednesday. I was 33 years old at that time. The years between 2004 and 2006 then produced large publishing advances, multiple #1 records, and more than 20 platinum and gold awards. I felt, for a stretch of about two years, genuinely unstoppable.

I want to tell you what unstoppable feels like, because it is the most dangerous condition an artist or entrepreneur can be in, and almost no one warns you about it. It feels like clarity.

It feels like proof that everything you have been doing is working. It feels like permission to scale, to commit, to expand, to assume that the next thing will land as well as the last thing because you have, at last, figured out how to do it. None of those feelings are reliable, and most of them are wrong. But they feel completely true at the time, and they can lead you to make decisions that take you a decade to undo.

I want to back up and tell you the part of the story that came before that, because it is the part that explains everything that happened after.

In 2000, my first major publishing deal arrived and I bought a house. Shortly after, my partners and I signed an artist named Tali to Mushroom Group's Liberation Records, with my team producing and writing the album. While I was working on that project, I was discovered by a US-based producer-manager named Sandy Roberton, who had worked with some of the biggest writer-producers in the business. Sandy connected me to a Los Angeles writer-producer team called The Matrix—Lauren Christy, Scott Spock, and Graham Edwards—who at the time were rapidly becoming one of the most successful pop production teams in the world. They needed extra production capacity to keep up with their work. They flew my entire studio rig to LA, multiple racks of gear, the kind of setup that took a few days to wire, and I committed to a two-month stint in a house in the Valley, working alongside Disney executives, major-label A&Rs, as well as the team.

I was paid well. The work was constant. The contacts were extraordinary.

And I was miserable.

I missed the entrepreneurial freedom I had built in Australia: the company-running, the deal-doing, the negotiations, the sense of building something that was mine. Working inside The Matrix's operation, I felt like an employee. At the end of the two months, the team and Sandy made a serious offer for me to stay

on permanently. They wanted me as part of the production line. It was, by any rational measurement of a producer's career, the offer of a lifetime.

I declined.

My equipment and I flew back to Australia. Less than a year later, the Tali album quietly stalled. Apart from two singles, it was never released. Around the same time, Avril Lavigne released her debut album. It sold over 20 million copies. Three of the biggest songs on it—*Complicated*, *Sk8er Boi*, *I'm With You*—were written and produced by The Matrix.

While their career exploded into one of the defining commercial moments of pop music in the early 2000s, mine, on paper, appeared to be moving backwards.

I am telling you this story because I would make the same decision again, and the reason I would make it again is the central argument of this chapter. I have always wanted to be my own boss. I have always preferred autonomy over security. The Matrix offer was extraordinary, and it was also, fundamentally, an offer to be a sub-contractor inside someone else's operation. The price of accepting it would have been the suppression of the part of me that would, over a decade later, find a way to build Songtradr. I did not know that at the time. I just knew that the offer felt wrong in my body, even though every metric on the page said it was right.

The Australian music industry, like every small market, is unforgiving. Investment is limited. The population is small. Even when something becomes a hit, it rarely converts into the kind of life-changing income a global hit can produce. In the US, when something works, it often works everywhere. Standing on the outside of that machine in 2002, watching former colleagues become very famous and very wealthy, I could feel a tension building inside me that I did not yet have language for.

That tension was the first appearance of an internal argument that would shape, and very nearly destroy, the next decade of my life.

We all carry different personalities inside us, and each one influences the decisions we make. If I reduce mine to the two strongest forces, they would be these.

There is the Creative: The part of me that wants to be at a piano, or in front of a screen, with headphones on, building something for its own sake. The part that has lived for the Spark since I was 16 years old. The part that does not care about money, scale, status, or strategy, and gets visibly impatient with anything that pulls me away from the work.

There is the Entrepreneur: The part of me that sees opportunity everywhere, often too many opportunities at once. The part that wants to build, scale, negotiate, structure, expand. The part that is comfortable in a boardroom, that enjoys deal-making, that can sit across the table from someone with 10× my experience and not blink. The part that, given the choice between making a record and building a company, will more often than not choose the company.

For the first 30 years of my life, the Creative was in charge. The Entrepreneur was a side character: useful, occasionally vocal, but subordinate to the work. Then the Creative achieved real success. He had hits. He had publishing deals. He had multiple recording studios in the US and Australia. A sports car. A mortgage. And finally, the image of a man who had figured it out.

And the moment that happened, the Entrepreneur staged a quiet coup.

He did not announce himself. He did not ask for permission. He simply began making the decisions. He negotiated more deals. He kept the Creative on planes between Australia and America. He committed the Creative to impossible deadlines

on multiple projects at once. He demanded 16-hour days. He started new ventures. He signed artists. He developed new products. He kept the Creative away from his young family during years he would later spend a long time trying to remember.

The Entrepreneur did not honor the Creative.

The Entrepreneur enslaved him.

This is the central argument of this chapter, and the reason the duality matters. The Creative and the Entrepreneur are both essential. Neither is bad. Neither is, by itself, complete. The trouble starts when one stops working *with* the other and starts working *over* the other. Inside any artist with serious commercial ambition, there will be a Creative and an Entrepreneur. The question is who is in charge of whom, and whether both parties have agreed.

In my case, they had not agreed. The Entrepreneur had simply assumed control. The Creative was producing the output that funded everything, but he no longer had a say in what got built around him.

I want to ground this in the most concrete decision it produced.

I met Victoria Wu, now Victoria Wiltshire, in mid-1999 at a Warner Chappell Publishing event designed to bring writers together. Victoria had been part of a successful Australian band called Culture Shock and was beginning her own artist, writing, and production career. We connected immediately. Some years later we began writing songs together, and not long after that we got married and had two children. Victoria became my production partner and co-writer, and the work we made together was some of the best work I have ever been part of. The first song we wrote was a pitch for a BMG-signed boy band called Mercury 4, and from the first hour of writing it, the dynamic was extraordinary: mutual respect, real space, genuine honoring of each other's contributions, ideas bouncing without ego. We went on to write

and produce songs for several major-label artists, including the Backstreet Boys.

Working with the Backstreet Boys changed us, and not only in the ways I had imagined it would.

The session itself was the realization of a goal I had been chasing for a decade. We were certain the song would be a single. It barely made the album, and according to our A&R contact would not have been there at all if the band hadn't insisted. That is one story, and I told the short version of it in the Preface. The longer story, the one that matters here, is what happened to us in the months and years afterwards.

The pressure to keep placing songs at that level was enormous. Most of it was self-imposed. I had spent my career trying to reach that room, and now that we were in it, the question was no longer *can we get here* but *can we stay*. Simultaneously, the Australian work began to flood in. Once I had a Backstreet Boys credit, I became one of the first calls for Australian major labels working on commercial releases. Our energy and focus stretched in two directions at once.

We were also, in the same period, getting married and starting a family.

This was where the tension truly began to surface, and where the Entrepreneur made his most consequential mistake.

He chose Australia.

The reasoning at the time was rational: The Australian work was paying. There was real momentum at home. The US market was uncertain. We had a young family. The risk of dropping the Australian work to chase US breakthroughs felt unjustifiable.

What followed was the run of Australian chart-toppers that defined the next two years: Human Nature, Guy Sebastian, Marcia Hines, Shannon Noll, and so on; multiple albums, multiple awards. By any local measurement I had succeeded. By the measurement that mattered to a writer-producer hoping

for a global career, I had probably traded the biggest shot of my career for safer, smaller ground that I already knew how to win on.

I want to say something honest here, because it is the core lesson of this chapter and I do not want to soften it.

I would make the same choice again. Not because it was the right choice—I am genuinely not sure whether it was—but because I now know who I am, and the decision was consistent with that. I am, by my own honest assessment, somewhere around 70% Entrepreneur and 30% Creative. The Entrepreneur in me, given the choice between a tangible business opportunity at home and a speculative one abroad, will choose the tangible one almost every time. That is not a flaw. It is just who I am.

The lesson is not that I should have moved to America. The lesson is that I should have *known what I was doing*, and made the decision consciously, with the Creative in the room rather than locked out of it. Instead, the Entrepreneur made the call alone, and the Creative spent the next several years quietly resenting it, missing his children's early years to deliver on commitments the Creative had never agreed to make.

That distinction—choices made consciously versus choices made by whichever part of you is loudest at the time—is the thing I most want you to take from this chapter.

Most artists have these two parts inside them, in different ratios. Some are 70% Creative, 30% Entrepreneur. Others, like me, the reverse. Some are 50/50, which I suspect is the hardest ratio to live with. Yet the percentages don't matter. What matters is that you know roughly which one you are, and that you do not let the louder one make decisions the quieter one will eventually have to live with.

This is also the moment to introduce a practical tool I have for managing that challenge, so you can better anticipate the consequences of decision-making.

I call it *pause*, *rewind*, *and fast-forward*. Pause the decision. Rewind through what got you here. Fast-forward through what happens next.

Every action you take in your career has a cause and an effect. The effects, in turn, produce further effects. A single decision, to take that meeting, to sign with that manager, to accept that advance, to commit to that tour, does not produce one outcome. It produces a chain of outcomes that branches as it goes. Some chains are positive: a small yes leads to a relationship that leads to an introduction that leads to a deal that funds the next album. Some chains are negative: a small yes to the wrong person leads to an obligation that limits a future yes that prevents a deal that would have funded the next thing. Most artists experience these chains as luck, but they are not luck. They are causality, and they can be partially mapped before they occur. I call these chains *causality strings* throughout the rest of the book.

Pause, *rewind*, *and fast-forward* is the practice of slowing down a decision long enough to look backward and forward before you commit to it. The pause is not passive. It is deliberate. In the pause you refuse to answer immediately. In the rewind, you look at what came before, what pattern the current decision rhymes with, what you have seen play out already. In the fast-forward, you trace three or four moves ahead—not to be paralyzed by analysis, but to give the quieter parts of you a fair hearing before the louder parts commit. Once the decision is made, you commit to it fully. The discipline is in the slowing-down, not in the second-guessing afterwards. This practice is more commonly understood as part of the Theory of Constraints, something I only learned about in 2017 after meeting Richard White, a wonderful mentor and friend, and investor in the company I've built over the past decade.

Most of the worst decisions I have ever made were made in moments where I did not think through the consequences; that

is, to pause, rewind, and fast-forward. The Entrepreneur in me was certain. The Creative had no time to object. The decision committed me to a chain of consequences I did not see coming. By the time I was inside the chain, I was already too far in to walk away easily, so I stayed in, and the chain grew, and the next bad decision built on the one before it.

This is, in essence, the story of the next four years of my life: the years that will become Chapter 5.

After the Backstreet Boys, I should have stopped expanding. I should have consolidated the work I had, paid down the debt I had, and given the Creative a fighting chance to recover. Instead, the Entrepreneur—emboldened by Australian success, hungry for more, certain that growth was the answer to every problem growth itself had created—kept building. New ventures. New artists signed to my label. New employees hired before there was revenue to support them. New investment properties bought on borrowings against assets that were appreciating in a market that was about to turn. The Creative, exhausted, kept producing the records that funded the whole structure, and the Entrepreneur kept reinvesting the proceeds into the next thing, and the next thing.

And then 2008 arrived, and the music industry's shrinking accelerated, the global financial system briefly stopped working, and I discovered what happens when a structure built on the assumption of continued growth meets a world that has stopped growing.

But before we get to that, I want to leave you with a working principle. You likely will, at some point, build something successful. The form will be different for everyone: a hit song, a tour that sells out, a record deal, a viral moment, a platform that takes off, or a song that moves someone. When that success arrives, the part of you that wants more will get loud. Listen carefully to which part of you that is. If it is the Entrepreneur, ask whether

the Creative agrees. If it is the Creative, ask whether the Entrepreneur has been consulted. If you cannot get a clear answer from both of them, do not move yet. Slow down. Pause, rewind, and fast-forward. Pay particular attention to the version of you who is quietest in the room, because that is usually the version who will be left to pay the bill.

That is what tension actually is. It is the gap between who is making the decisions and who is going to live with them.

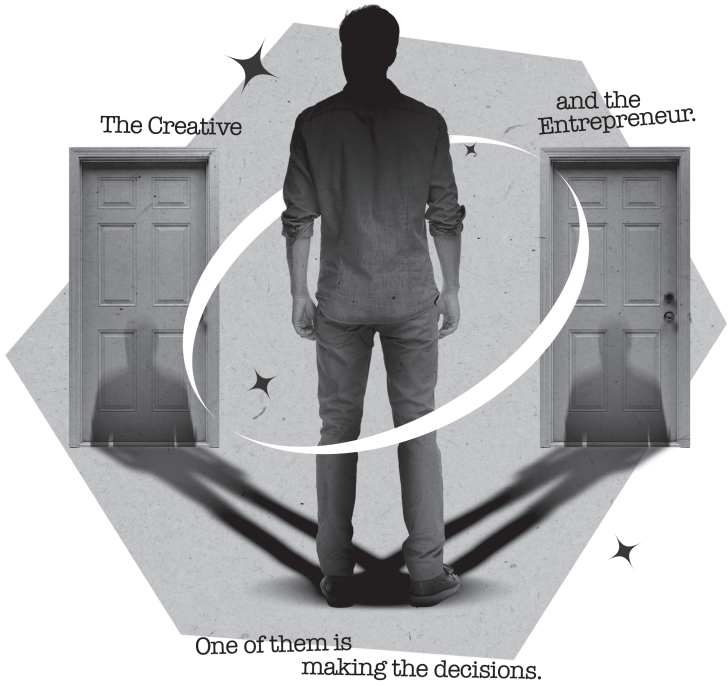
Practice Notes—Tension

- Know your own ratio. Are you 70/30 Entrepreneur, 60/40 Creative, evenly split? The answer matters less than the act of naming it, because once you have named it you can notice when one part is overruling the other.
- When a major decision arrives—signing a deal, taking a meeting, committing to a project, hiring someone, accepting an investment—pause long enough to ask which part of you is making the call, and whether the other part has agreed. If you cannot get a clean yes from both, the decision is not ready.
- Pause, rewind, and fast-forward. Write the decision down in one sentence. List the immediate outcomes. Project the first ripple—for each outcome, ask *and then what?* Map at least three moves ahead. Run an alternative version of the chain in parallel. The comparison usually makes the better path obvious.
- Check against the gut. If the chain looks fine on paper but feels wrong in your body, pay attention. That misalignment is where careers quietly derail.

(*continued*)

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- Once the work is done, decide and commit. The discipline is in the preparation, not in the endless second-guessing afterwards. Do not be afraid of making bad choices. Be afraid of making them without knowing you made them. Learn from the mistakes and you win either way.



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