



Can Do MS Interviews

Art Alexakis

Episode 27

Rachael Protas: This is the Can Do MS Podcast. I am Rachael Protas. Our guest today is Art Alexakis, front man for the rock band Everclear. Last year, Art released his debut solo album Sun Songs, which features the song Hot Water Test and it is inspired by his own MS journey.

[song plays]

Rachael: The music video for this song dropped last April and features MS warriors of varying ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds, coming together to sing the emotional lyrics that recount the day Art was personally diagnosed with the disease. Art Alexakis, thanks so much for joining us. Congratulations on your new solo album and the premiere of your new music video Hot Water Test.

Art Alexakis: Thank you very much. I appreciate you having me on.

Rachael: Before we go into detail about your music video, I feel like it is appropriate to ask, how are you?

Art: Oh, I am about 5 foot ten and a half. 152 pounds, kind of fighting weights here.

Rachael: Yeah.

Art: I am good. I am in California where we all listen to our governor and stay inside, and social distance, and we are flattening that curve. We are doing what we can in this time. Some people saw it coming but the overwhelming majority of us had no idea this was happening in February. We did not know what it was going to look like. For people with MS, and people with autoimmune diseases, and even people who have had- like a friend of mine, kicked cancer. He has been in remission for four years but he is in serious danger if he gets COVID-19. It could be really devastating for him. So there is a level of anxiety and fear. I feel very comfortable, thank you for asking. I am very blessed to have a nice, decent house to live in, I got a pool, and my wife and daughter were all wonderful and doing well. So life is good.

Rachael: And so this new album that you finished, is that your solo debut with Sun Songs?

Art: Yeah, Sun Songs. It came out last October, kind of a soft, soft debut. Yeah, that was just me in a room. Just me and the engineer. And the first time I had ever done anything like that recorded in my studio down the street from my house. And yeah, it is ninety percent, ninety five percent all acoustic instruments. I think ninety eight percent all acoustic instruments. I played everything, sang all the vocals. I am really happy with the way it came out. It came out very raw. I wanted it to be raw, no Pro Tools, no autotune. I want it to sound like a record that I had grown up with in the early to mid-seventies like early Joni Mitchell record or John Prime record or something like that. And it has got that vibe. I am excited when it came out.

Rachael: And at what part of the process did Hot Water Test kind of come to life? It is a very personal song, and where did that fit in to Sun Songs?

Art: Well, being a solo record, I have already written about personal stuff when needed to. There is about three to four autobiographical songs on each every record. And the same on this record, there is about three songs that are straight autobiographical. Man, I am having a hard time today, sorry about that. But as far as writing about the MS, when I wrote the song, I had not been public about my MS. I got diagnosed in 2016. And they think I have had it at the time for fifteen to twenty years. So it has been about four years since I got diagnosed. I got diagnosed in late April of 2016. I wrote the song and did not know if it was going to come out on the record. I thought it was because it was a pretty hooky song. Once the song kind of flushes itself out, lyrics and melody-wise, recording-wise, I knew it was going to come out and I knew that I was probably going to say something before I put it out. And I wanted to work with organizations such as yourself, and I have been working with Sweet Relief for four years and the MS Society. I was not ready for that a few years ago. I was not ready for that. I was getting used to the idea of what it was about for me. And I needed to make sense of that. And part of that process of making sense of what it meant to me was writing the song The Hot Water Test. And so I felt a lot of closure from writing that song, or not closure really but connection, and sense-making, if that makes any sense. I felt like it made sense for me now and then it was time for me to tell people about it. I mean, I had never hid from it. But if I met people who have MS, I talk to them about me. And my family and friends, close friends knew about it. But I had not made it public until last year about this. I think it was March of last year. And got such an outpouring of love and support from everywhere. I expected a few hundred people on our fan pages respond. And we got ten thousands of people responding from all over the world. I felt really good.

Rachael: And you mentioned that this is kind of an autobiographical album. How much of the song is autobiographically true versus emotionally true of your MS journey, would you say?

Art: Well, that is a good question. Actually, what I said is about third of the record is autobiographical. There, I get the word right that time. So about three songs, three or four song. As far as the song goes, it is pretty, pretty dead on. I mean, what happened is I got in a car accident in 2016. And about two weeks later, no one is hurt, but it totaled my car. About two weeks later, I started getting a twinge in my neck. And I called my doctor and he was like, "It sounds like you get a [inaudible] from the impact. Come in, I will give you a shot. First, we

will get an MRI so I see where it is at. And then I can give you a shot and loosen that up." I am like, "Okay." So I get the MRI, I go in there and I see this guy all the time and walk into his little examination room, which it is crowded if you got two people in there. And I walked in there and there is like six guys, and in [inaudible], and I walked in and they all looked at me this really serious look. I am just like, "Oh, I do not know what this is, but this is not good." And they told me of what they suspected. There is a couple of neurologists in there. And then I called my wife and we cried, and then I went home and she looked like she had three computers gone, looked like she was trying to hack into Fort Knox. And she was just, "Baby, we got this. We got this. We are going to do this." And we have not looked back. The Sun was pretty, pretty hundred percent real. I do not think there is anything emotionally not real in there or unfactual. I do not think my wife said the exact words of, "Easy can be hard to do." I will take the credit for that. I mean, she said something to that effect for sure.

Rachael: And so you mentioned these lines by your wife, they are in the song. And these words kind of become a constant refrain throughout the story. Was it a conscious choice to make those lines at the heart of the song or did it just come together like that?

Art: Oh, well, I am a pop songwriter so I like to have a chorus that is not exactly the same but close enough that it becomes a hook. But I like it when it changes a little bit every time. So that is kind of what happens, that is kind of what I did. But I mean, if you listen to the song, at first, that is her theme and then it is me saying it to myself and then me saying it to the world. So it kind of morphs every time.

Rachael: And so when it came to turning this song into a music video, typically, how much say do you as the artist have in the final projects?

Art: One hundred percent, the artist has a hundred percent control. They just do not know it. I have always known it. No, this was my idea. I went to my management the idea and I went to my label the idea of what I wanted. I wanted to make a video where me and other people who had MS were singing the lyrics to the song. And I wanted different faces, I wanted female faces, I wanted people of color, I wanted people at varying degrees of the disease. And I just wanted to show that it hit anybody, everybody, everywhere. And that there is a connection that we can all make. So that was my idea going into it. That is what I [inaudible] everybody. They loved the idea. I talked to a few directors, I ended up really connecting with Danny, on the Wrecking Crew. And he got it right from the beginning. And we were actually introduced by people from the organization Sweet Relief. I went to them and I went to them as a society and asked them if they could help me connect with people. And we put out a casting call through those organizations and found these people to come do it and it was not a bunch of famous people. Just everyday people who would come in my studio one Saturday and we filmed everybody in one day. Very, very low budget for sure.

Rachael: And in the video, I loved it when you were describing all the people in the video as living with MS versus diagnosed with MS.

Art: Right.

Rachael: Why was it such an important distinction for you?

Art: Because it is a different thing. You can be diagnosed or you can have it. I have been actually living with it for much longer than my diagnosis. But living with it and being present with it with any disease whether it is alcoholism or cancer. I have lived with cancer not with myself but with various people in my family and friends. So when you get to be older, I am fifty eight. Unfortunately, part of the thing is people start getting sick, people die. The older you get, it is just life, that is the math. That is the way it works. I have learned enough from seeing that in other instances, that when it came to express the way I felt about MS and people with MS, it gave me a different level of compassion, I think, on how to communicate it. And that is what I was looking for with the director and editor. Everybody worked on it and I think they did a great job. I got no complaints whatsoever.

Rachael: It is a very beautiful day, though. What was it like to be on set with that group of people?

Art: It was fun. I mean, I have been on many, many sets in my life. Videos, movies and TV shows. But this is really special and really different because all these people have come all the way. I think we did sixteen different people who them and their [inaudible] in the family and their parents and their husbands and wives had taken that time that day to come out and do this and put themselves on the line, put themselves on record. So brave and so just bad ass. All these people are just amazingly brave and awesome. And so being on this side as opposed to other side, this is quite unique for sure.

Rachael: Was it getting emotional as people were recording this?

Art: Yeah.

Rachael: Saying these lines and crying and smiling and laughing, was not just something that happened organically throughout the process?

Art: Absolutely. And we just filmed everything. What you see on the film, there is not a whole lot of direction there, if any. There is no direction. They got the lyrics ahead of time. And some were better than others, and some were more expressive than others, and some are just farther along in the disease than others. And their ability to control their mannerisms and facial expressions are different. But that is what I wanted. I wanted it to be real, not necessarily pretty and glossy, but real and gritty, but beautiful all at the same time.

Rachael: And why now? Was there ever discussion about maybe postponing the launch of this video with COVID? Why did you decide to with this launch today?

Art: Well, to be honest with you, we filmed this last September but I had a hard time with it.

Well, for one thing, I was sick for a month and a half over the holidays. And then I toured the states for my solo record in January. And then I was gone, and all of February in Australia. But to be honest with you, and with everyone, I just had a hard time watching this video. And emotionally, I just could not get my head around finishing it. I could, I mean, we wanted this to come out in October, but it came out when it was ready to come out regardless of Coronavirus or the COVID-19. Regardless of that, I just felt like, this is the time for it to come out. This is the organic time for it to come out.

Rachael: And what do you hope the MS community takes away from this song?

Art: Nothing. When people put out expressions, I think if you do it with some sort of expectation of what you are going to get in return, you are going to be one thing. I think it is precocious at best, pretentious at worst. And secondly, and more importantly, you are going to be disappointed in what you get. To me, what I have always done is when I feel good about something, I put it out in the world and let it do what it is going to do. I do not have hopes, I do not have fears. I just put it out. And if people need me to explain stuff, I do not have a problem interviews or podcasts like this and explaining it. But I do not have any expectations. But from the reviews of the record and of the song when it was just a single, there remains not a negative one. I do not know how people are going to react to this. People in the community and people outside of the community. I do not know because it is very intense. I hope that people in the community see this as a positive thing. And that this is a thing done by a fellow MS warrior, and it was done with love.

Rachael: Art, it has been a pleasure on behalf of the entirety of Can Do MS, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for your voice. Thank you for shining a light on the MS community. We cannot wait to see what you do next.

Art: Thank you, Rachael. I appreciate that. All the best here.

Rachael: The Hot Water Test is drawn from Art's debut solo album Sun Songs, which was released in October 2019 via The End Records and BGM. It is now available for purchase and streaming on Spotify, iTunes, Google Play and Amazon Music.

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