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HOST: When you hear country music, do you think ... art? What is art? If it is in the eye and ear of the beholder, then couldn't country music be art to someone? Corb Lund is a singer-songwriter and self-professed artist. His artform is country music, and in his own words, he works hard to create it and believes that work - that constant challenge to focus and refine - is what separates the artists from the rest. Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Corb Lund, speaking at The Walrus Talks in Calgary:

CORB LUND: I write cowboy songs for a living and, I want to change the name of my talk. 'Cause I initially had titled I think it's called "Me and Art." The reason I named it that because it was three in the morning, the deadline where I had to submit the title and I was kind of lit up and I thought it would be really funny to, I thought it would really be funny to pretend that I thought they wanted me to talk for seven minutes about my uncle Art. He was a cowboy. I've got a great picture of him. So if we meet in the lobby, I'll show you the picture. But, um, I would like to rename it to "Art for Everybody." I'm going to start off with a couple of definitions. I've thought about this a lot in the van about how to define art.

My favorites are refined creativity and focused self-expression. And the adjectives are key there because refined and focused is - that's the only real difference between artists and people who are, who think they aren't artists. Because I think that anyone has had the experience of, coming up with a lot. I know people have come up with songs because I could put all the time, but, uh, you know, an idea for a movie or they're doodling on a pad with a pen that turns out better than they thought it, any of those things, that's all it is really. It's just, it's a matter of that's all artists do is take those things and focus on them and, and spend a lot of time and commitment and hard work, uh, refining those things. And eventually I guess, they're artists, right?

I think it sort of dovetails into something I feel strongly about. I think that, I think that natural talent is overrated and I think that desire trumps it. I'm not, that doesn't mean that there aren't people who are ahead of us when we, you know, like I know plenty of people who could sing without any training and they could play guitar and I know people can write very well without any training and dance. But I think I also know people who can do those things really well, who haven't pursued them enough. And it's really frustrating for those of us who had to work at it. But, uh, I think that in the lean years I used to teach guitar lessons and everybody had a reason they thought they couldn't play guitar. Their hands are too big or their hands are too small or too thick or too thin, but really 99% of the time, it's really just a matter of doing it. And like I said, this is important because we all have people around us who were clearly ahead of the game before, you know, they're further along than we are, but I think that can be overcome. I think that's a really important point.

That's also not to say that it doesn't discount the fact that there are Michelangelo's out there and Charlie Russell's and Jimmy Hendrix's is that we'll never be. But I think I firmly believe that anybody who's willing to put the time into it and the commitment and the hard work can be an artist and create great art. Um, but that's, that's kind of the rub, the last sentence. Cause the hard work is, is really hard and it's not, it's not like ditch digging hard. It's psychologically hard. Art has a way of sneaking up on you and making you really examine yourself in a really deep way. If you're gonna really fully commit to an artistic life, you have to re-examine yourself over and over and over. And it's really scary and it's depressing and it's sad. Um, but it's true. I think



everybody will attest to that who, who does art, but on the flip side, it's hopefully in equal measures is joyous and it's liberating and it's really, really satisfying.

In my line of work as a songwriter, what I always get asked is do you work the words first or the music first? And sometimes the answer really is I don't sometimes just the word first and sometimes it's the music first and sometimes it's both. Sometimes it's neither, sometimes it's the mushrooms first, but you take my point. The point is there's no real way of doing it – art is dirty, man. It's true.

It's down in the muck. And it's funny about I'm going to digress for a second. It's funny because I've always wondered about that because as soon as you get into the theater or one step away from the actual artists, it becomes a very highbrow operation, but the artists themselves, I know them and it's, it's, it's very much not that like they're, you know, they're smoking dope and they're drinking whiskey and they didn't make the rent and they're cheating on their girlfriends and it's, it's very messy stuff, but, uh, that's kind of what makes art it's true.

Um, anyway, back to the original thought. Words or music, my point with that is that almost every time I write songs and make a record, it's, it's a new challenge. And it's funny because it seems like the second, the second that you think, you know how to do it, you don't actually know how to do it because as soon as you get complacent about it and think, “Oh, I got this, I can do this without really trying,” your music suffers or your, your art suffers in my opinion. And, um, uh, you have to be very vigilant about that. And it's really scary. You have to re-examine yourself every time and you never really ... you know, my buddy Ian Tyson's 83 years-old and he has the same insecurity as all of us do when he makes a new record, we talk about it all the time and it's, it's a, it's a battle every time. But having said that it's very satisfying. I would recommend it to anybody. It's, uh, it's true. There's a lot of potential for growth there.

Another point about bringing music and art to everybody is that, um, I'm in a unique position because, um, people that go to the Glenbow and see the paintings on the wall, everyone knows that's art, that's acknowledged as art. And you know, if you go to, I saw, I saw Hoffman do *Death of a Salesman* in New York last year and that's everyone, pretty much everybody at the theater would probably consider that art. But I'm in a weird place because not everyone considers country music, art, and granted, not all country music is art, but some of us are it's true. I'm not being funny. Some of us do our best to, uh, to make art. And I'll tell you, you know, when you're in the, you know, even when I play the Calgary Folk Festival, for example, a lot of the people in the audience would probably consider what me and some of the artists are doing as art.

But when I, when I'm playing the Honky Tonk in Lubbock, Texas, or maybe Nanton, Alberta, you know, they don't recognize what some of us are doing as art. And in fact, sometimes they flat out deny it. Like, I don't know about that art chip but I like me some Willie Nelson, you know, that kind of thing. But I would argue that those people maybe need art the most. And, and I think that I know enough roughnecks and Cowboys and truckers that our society has very few outlets for those people to express themselves. And for some reason it's okay, you know, to get real maudlin and real, real open about your feelings when there's a Willie Nelson song on. Um, but I think that art is really important for those people. And, you know, that sort of leads back into my, my central thought about art being for everybody. But I think that, um, we forget that sometimes because a lot of what's considered, I think it's the way the word developed in the language art, art just doesn't seem to sit right with some forms of art yet it is art. So I guess I'll leave it there and say that, remember that art is for the people at the Glenbow and the people at the ballet, but it's for the shitsheads in the bar too.

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Corb Lund from The Walrus Talks “What is Art?”



HOST: Corb Lund spoke at The Walrus Talks “What is Art, Anyway,” in 2016, and he’s just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks.

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