

Will Oldham barest interview: "I trust that there are people every day, finding their way to the pieces of work that are going to be important in their lives"

Salon exclusive: The gutsy, mercurial actor and musician opens up on the magic behind his creative process

By **PETER MACHEN**

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Will Oldham (Drag City)

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Known most widely as Bonnie "Prince" Billy, Will Oldham started acting years before he became a singer, and, although it is his prolific musical output that has predominated over the course of the last three decades, he has played a fair number of roles in small, independent films, from a young evangelist in the John Sayles film *Matewan* (1986) to a bohemian outsider in *Edén* (2015), the delicately hewn debut feature film from director Elise DuRant.

In a career-spanning interview, Salon spoke with Oldham about his parallel journeys in film and music.

Do you see your acting roles and your musical work as part of the same spectrum of expression, or are they separate things for you? And which came first?

They're interrelated for sure, but they're crucially separate because, with the music, almost all of the time I'm overseeing something, and with acting, almost all of the time I'm observing another individual or individuals – which is really great!

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The acting came first. I started acting when I was really young. And I kept doing it pretty intensely and rigorously throughout my teens, to a point where I sort of figured that that's what I was going to do. And then, when I started to look at the real, professional world of making a living as an actor, it just didn't look very good to me. [laughs]

So I lived for a little bit in Los Angeles, a little bit in New York, and it just didn't strike me as something that I could do – that I could stomach, really. There were a couple of years when I really didn't know what I was going to do, and I just started to write music – I don't even know why. And there was an interest in it from people to hear more, so I kept doing that. But I felt like my ability to deal with music and to make the music came from wondering about art and the logistics of art production through theatre and film, and understanding what's behind these illusions that we are so in love with, or so in need of.

So they support each other. One of the best examples to me of the relationship between making music and acting was during the making of the *Old Joy* (2006) movie. During that time, I felt sort of set free by living under Kelly Reichardt's auspice. She determined what came out of my mouth and where I sat and where I slept and what I ate and all these things. And that sort of freed my brain up. And, at the time, a colleague of mine was doing a record with a woman named Candi Staton, who's an R&B/Gospel singer, and he asked me to write a song for her. And I found that I could work on that song while making the *Old Joy* movie, because they were completely unrelated in my brain.

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And, all of a sudden, I had this huge free space open up, because I wasn't fussing over production details, which is what I usually am involved with. And I usually try to make it as pleasurable and rewarding as possible, but that can be a challenge sometimes. And, all of a sudden, I had this musical part of my brain that I almost never even have access to, to explore the potential for writing a song for someone. I was overjoyed.

That's interesting. On the one hand, it's a freeing process, but, on other the hand, you do exercise a strong degree of control over your work and professional and artistic life. So do you ever find it frustrating – that kind of “freedom” – where you have to stand back and let someone else take control? Does being directed ever feel like an imposition?

Oh, no, not at all. You know, in general, it's a great pleasure in life to serve other people, and on some levels, as a musician, I'd almost rather be a singer in somebody else's band. Because most of my natural tendencies in terms of thinking about performing arts – or whatever you want to call it – are towards interpretation, and are about performing. And so I'm very happy when I can put myself in somebody's hands and I can listen to them and I can read between the lines of what they're saying – this is talking about a director, but in collaboration with a writer whose words I'm supposed to be saying. I love the distribution of labor. I love collaborations, but especially collaborations where you know approximately where the boundaries of your job are in relation to the boundaries of everybody else's job.

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And that's one reason why I didn't want to be a professional actor – there are not a lot of people that I feel like I can trust enough to yield to in that way. But every once in a while there comes a situation where it's like, "I feel comfortable letting this person define my actions for a period of time."

So, is it the director rather than the role that attracts you to a film? Or is it both?

It's everything. It can be combinations of the director, the writer, and the relationship of the director and/or the writer to the material. It can be the location. It can be the kind of production that it's going to be.

I tend to like smaller productions because I like the interdependence that a smaller production fosters in the crew and the cast. And I like the fact that you're kind of on set with all the decision-makers which is ... *[laughs]*... not how the producer or director would ideally want it. You know – they look forward to one day having some decision-maker on top, behind a desk, spending the money. But at the end of the day, it's more, I don't know... to me it's more rewarding to be sort of on the battleground, or whatever – at the front – with everybody who knows what's going on and who are making decisions that are going to affect the fate of the movie.

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Yeah. Because it seems to me, specifically thinking about *Edén* and *Old Joy* and *New Jerusalem*, that there is such a thing as a Will Oldham film.

[Laughs]

I mean...I love all three of those films very much and they all talk to me in quite a specific way, even though they're all different to each other. So, do you think that these roles you play reflect parts of yourself at all?

Uh yeah. I...know that they do. In the biggest way, that's really true of *New Jerusalem* (2011), simply because it's an unscripted film. Every line of dialogue I had to find – and that dialogue had to come from somewhere. And then with *Old Joy* – for a long time Kelly and I were talking about me playing the other part in that movie, and then she couldn't cast the Kurt character and asked if I wouldn't mind playing the Kurt character instead.

And that was a kind of a relief, because the Kurt character represented so many people that I knew and it was more productive for me that I mastered that character rather than the other character.

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And then with John in the film *Edén*, I'm not a parent, you know, but I have relationships with lots of young folk. I have five godchildren and I know lots of kids and I'm friends with lots of kids, and I...don't really have parents myself anymore. It was being able to – at this point I'm 45 – think about my memories of my

parents and the things that they did and the things that they didn't do, and the way that they tried to connect with me, and the ways that they were completely unaware of how disconnected we were. And having the opportunity to experience some of that as John in the movie was brilliant.

There was a great woman in Texas who was making a movie last year, and who wanted me to play a dentist who's part of some weird sadomasochistic pagan sex cult. And I thought, "why am I not excited about this part?" because it sounds kind of fun. But ultimately, I couldn't. I just said "I don't think I can play this part. I'm really sorry! I really would love to be there with you. I'd love to work on this and it looks like so much fun. But I can't imagine getting on set and doing something that anybody's going to want to see, or that anybody would believe." So that is definitely a part of what goes into deciding if I could try to do something – whether or not I can see my way to finding what I hope would be a piece of work that would resonate with me.

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It seems that both your film roles and your music exist at an intersection of what I would call religiosity and the profane, and kind of reflect both of these things. Does that make sense to you?

Yeah, I think so. In terms of music, I think that what I do is related to certain kinds of music traditions as I see them – popular music really. And popular music usually has a relationship to the sacred and the profane – and to the idea of music activating a part of the brain that frees you, for a moment, from certain kinds of realities, and allows you free rein in another kind of reality.

Usually that kind of departure can be equated with some sort of religious experience – or a fully profane and physical experience. You know, there's no place for putting lots of words into describing these experiences, and, if anything, you want to walk the tightrope balance between just full-on interjections and exclamations. But you also want to be as eloquent as possible with the interjections and explanations because you want to describe your predicament or your ecstasy or your despair in such a way that it, as closely as possible, resembles the feeling you're describing, but, at the same time, is elevated by thoughts and language and all that. But movies are different because they're longer...

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[Laughs]

They're longer. And they allow for interaction and they allow for physical movement through space. And they demand that the audience be captive. So, in that way, they can step further away from this sacred/profane thing and towards a wider spectrum of experiences and emotions.

But it feels like, when it comes down to it, with most of the music that I love, the subject matter ends up being fairly simple. The lyrics of the songs that I listen to – whether they're songs from the 1920s or songs from 2004, or whether they're from whatever part of the world or whatever age of the musician or songwriter – they don't, for the most part, stray into detailed interactions and significantly detailed and different realities. Whereas movies do allow for that.

My experience of movies has always been that it's like going to a pharmacy or like going to a church. It's like some sort of addiction to entering somebody else's world that has this disembodiment that's similar to music but it's so much more thorough. You know how you have to run alongside of a train and get up to speed before you can get on it – you sort of have to do that with the cinematic experience. But it's usually not a euphoric departure from your reality and from your body. It's much more complex.

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It seems to me that a key concern in all your work is authenticity, but I'll say with a lowercase "a," since we live in a time when authenticity is something that is marketed and sold, almost as a product. Do you feel this tension – and also the tension between accessing a larger audience and fighting against fame in the way that you have?

Yeah, this authenticity thing is very important to me, in certain ways. You know, to some extent, it's impossible to do it completely, and it can be impossible to do it thoroughly. But at least, on some level, I like to feel like I care about the perception of what it is that I've done with the audience, that it's not totally separate, that the audience doesn't think one thing about a part I've played, or a song that I've been a part of, and I think something completely different about it.

At the same time, I do love show business and I love the fact that people work so hard to create an illusion or an alternate reality or a parallel reality. I love that. But I think that the golden age of Hollywood – you know, the new golden age, being the mid '60s to the mid to late '70s – was possibly the only time that there was a dominant acting style that was allowed to be authentic.

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I know that as I discover particular pieces of work – whether it's books or movies or music from all different parts of the world, from all different times – how powerfully they can resonate with me. And, in terms of reaching an audience, I work under the assumption that I am in a movie right now, and this year only some people will get to see it. That doesn't really worry me because next year more people will see it. And the year after that, still more people will see it. I think that these things have a life of their own. I don't put a lot of stock in a large audience but I do put a lot of stock in a wide audience.

And I trust that there are people every day, finding their way to the pieces of work that are going to be important in their lives, either accidentally, or through some sort of dogged discipline. You know, "What is it that I need? I need something. My community isn't speaking to me. I'm not even communicating with myself – I don't know what's going on." And you find a new gateway for understanding through some piece of work that somebody has made.

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And that's something that, thankfully, continues to happen and will continue to happen. And it's not even trackable, you know, it's not a trackable thing – where you can look at numbers or you can look at box office returns, or you can look at theatres, look at how many copies of something has sold – because, to work like this, it happens on such a non-traceable human level.

And it's completely vital that as many people as possible seek and experience these things, these movies and music. But the boundaries are impossible, are defined by who relates to what. You and I can look at the same piece of work and find different aspects of authenticity, and they would both be completely valid. I can never invalidate it when somebody says a thing is great that I can't understand at all, or that I disdain. That's how I learn what is authentic to somebody else – when they describe their own response to a piece of music or art.

One thing I've really realized is that there's no such thing as critical consensus, that everything talks to us in different ways. I recently re-watched *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1986). Did the experience of making the film have any deep experience on your life and your craft?

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Oh yeah, yeah. That was one of the most crucial experiences. It was a hugely important experience for many reasons – working with John Sayles and Maggie Renzi – who is John's production partner – and Peggy Rajski, who also was a producer on the film. And, there were a lot of people that they'd worked with many times who had the same attitude towards the work.

I was 16 and they gave me so much respect and so much responsibility. It was the first time I felt like I had a place in the world. There were times when I was younger when I went to summer camp, and, you know, I loved it, or when I acted in a play and I loved it. But this was the first time that I was sort of out in the world a little bit, and working with people on a big project that had resonance outside of rural Kentucky. And I got paid for it! Which was huge. It distorted my reality significantly and, you know, I would essentially be a gentler, happier person if I hadn't experienced that movie – because it sorts of sets the standard high for collaborative, rewarding work.

And it's something that I've sought to either find or recreate throughout my adult life. And it's a lot of work to have that high standard set for me. It felt so natural and felt so logical to me, and it's continually frustrating that other people don't have that standard when they're making something. But I'll never be able to get rid of that example. And I try to achieve a working environment or working experience that is similarly eye-opening and supportive and rewarding for the people that I work with, and ideally, by extension, for the audience.

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It was working with those actors, the character, and also beginning to even have a relationship with an audience outside of Louisville at that point. Because I would travel and talk to people on the street about the movie – and it might be somebody who is a labor enthusiast or, a movie person, or just a plain old citizen. And realizing that I had something to talk about with them and with people all over the place– it's still something that I talk about with people – it was a great experience!

At the same time, you know, frankly, I was aware then that, in wanting to be an actor – and thinking about the actors whose work I admired, including those who were on that set – that I felt like I didn't have enough inside of me, as a technician – or even as a human being – to be the kind of actor that I would want to work with or experience, even as an audience member. And that scared me, got me thinking, "I don't want to keep acting if this is all I've got. So how do I get more?" And it was about trying to do more roles and get more experience so that I could be an actor. But then I ended up being a singer instead.

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Do you think you will ever work with John Sayles again?

That's a great question. I would love to work with him again and I would do so anytime. I hadn't seen him in a number of years, and then he came through a couple of years ago on a book tour, doing readings from his recent 1,000-page historical novel, and he and Maggie stayed at the house. And then maybe about two years ago now – I was in New York and they invited me to come to a preview screening of *Go for Sisters*, which at the time was his most recent movie. Spending time with him again and then seeing that movie and the way the acting was so cool and so good – it seems like his productions are always about allowing the actors and everybody in the crew to feel free to do their best work. And he's aware of how to make that happen. Of course, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be widely recognized. But I can't imagine that any self-respecting actor could watch one of his movies and not be inspired.

In terms of your most recent film, *Edén*, did you immediately relate to the John character or did you have to spend some time digging around in your head to find the character?

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I definitely had to spend time digging around in my head. John was more like the kind of person that I would, somewhat ignorantly, probably have claimed as a role model as a young person. Up until the age of 25 or so, if I had met John in person, I would have thought, "why is this guy doing everything right and I'm doing everything wrong?"

And that's not a person I can identify with, because I almost never feel like I'm doing anything – let alone everything – right [*laughs*]. In terms of how I live, I think I do my work really well. But it seems like he's the kind of person whose life was more his work, rather than the opposite, and he was trying to make a life that was kind of a work of art.

He had this relation with folk art, and it felt like living on the fringes of multiple kinds of societies and exercising a kind of ultimate set of freedoms. Which at the end of the day or the end of one's life, I think turns out to not have a lot of rewards, but at the beginning of the day, seems to have a lot of rewards. So, it was like trying to find my way into somebody who I would have admired a lot more as a younger person and now I feel compassion for him but I don't idolize him.

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Did the fact that John is a character that was inspired by director Elise DuRant's father in any way influence the relationship between the two of you on set?

I'm sure that it did but we never spoke about it. Down the road, she and I can probably have a conversation about that. And frankly that was one of the things that was very interesting about playing John – knowing that there was most likely going to be an unspoken but complex relationship between me and John and Elise and Alma [the character based on Elise played by Diana Sedano], that, most likely, would not be verbally explored while we were doing it, but which would be an undeniable part of the energy of what we were doing.

I wasn't just playing a part. I wasn't just playing a character created out of somebody's imagination. On many levels, I was a representation of somebody that this person who is trying to direct me has some finished and many unfinished...you know...lots of feelings about. And knowing that, I thought that it would be a great challenge overall.

Because of our conversations, I knew that her attitude was that "we're making a movie – this is a professional undertaking with great craftspeople and we're going to do this." And not really talking about, never saying, "Because I want to explore this thing about my dad and me, and because I want to explore the nature of memory" or anything like that. She never talked about that. And I was really intrigued by the idea of having all these unspoken forces being at work while we were making this movie.

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Would you ever want to have children yourself?

Yeah, I would. I feel like if I don't, there's probably not that much point to living too much longer. I'm in my mid-40s and I think I've taken up enough space and breathed up enough of everybody's oxygen. And if I don't sort of take what I've learned and try to throw it into some other being, then I haven't fulfilled that fantasy.

Although you also have done that, on a daily basis, through your music and also through your film work.

Yeah, I guess, and to some extent those things might take care of me in my old age. But – and it doesn't work for everybody – there's something about the potential immediacy of actual human interaction. In a lot of ways I agree with you, but I don't think that's really fair to the parents of the world. There are definitely parallels and then there are ways that they just don't compare.

Absolutely. Do you think that there's a strong overlap between your musical fan-base and your film following?

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I don't know how much crossover there is. I feel like I've run into enough people in both camps who are relatively unaware of the fact that I do other things. And I think that I like that. I had to write a bio a couple of weeks ago and for some reason it occurred to me to write it as if Bonnie Prince Billy has been an extended role that I've been playing for the last 15 years or so. I think I wrote something like "Bonnie 'Prince' Billy is a singer played by Will Oldham." Because I want eventually to understand the relationship between the two things – I want my audience to not feel as if they're watching a singer trying to act or an actor trying to sing, but that there is something that is in common with both things.

Since the beginning I've always talked about the music as coming from acting. I came from the *Matewan* experience. More than anything I knew about music, I was trying to repeat what I had experienced in *Matewan* but bring it in musical form. And I always thought that making a record was more like making these...

these little movies.

And I'm not a musician. I don't jam or anything like that. I've never jammed! I don't do those things. And I don't think of music in the same way that great musicians think of music. I find a basic texture upon which to sing the text. Which is what an actor does, you know. An actor vocalizes and embodies the text as it appears first on paper. And I don't know of other actors who make music or musicians who act who approach it in quite the same way.

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There's also a paradox in that the "performativeness" of your work creates this incredibly strong sense of the real, as opposed to the performed or the contrived.

The performativeness of acting or singing, or both?

Well, both actually, but let's talk about your music for a second, performed as this character who is Bonnie "Prince" Billy, who is also very real. And the music is very real – it's incredibly emotionally evocative and I'm sure it speaks to many people's souls. So there is that paradox.

Well, yes, I think that it's vital to have an authentic relationship to any given song every single time that it's performed. But one day that authenticity could be based on one thing and the next day on another.

You know, the great thing about Bonnie "Prince" Billy is that I can authentically be Bonnie "Prince" Billy even if I can't authentically be the narrator of the song. And Bonnie "Prince" Billy, then, is like this character in Steven Sondheim's *Send in the Clowns* or like anybody in an MGM musical or like Edith Piaf. At that moment I'm playing the singer of the song – the singer being somebody whose life doesn't exist until the song begins and whose life ends when the song is over.

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Someone who is not you?

Well, it is, though, because that *is* me to some extent. I think of the great Al Jolson, I think of the people in Ozu's *Floating Weeds* movies – these people for whom life begins at the beginning of the song. And to a great extent, that is me, and it especially is me when I'm singing the song. But it's not me in that I'm not relaying my life as much as I'm answering this abstract state of emotion that's expressed through musicality.

A performer has to learn the rules of the world of dreams, how dreams end up being structured and having tensions and having story and having character. And there are rules, you know, that exist in order for us to even to be able to describe that a dream occurred.

So somebody might write a song about their dog dying or their girlfriend breaking up with them and then they sing it and they're talking about their dog dying or they're talking about their girlfriend. That isn't the kind of performer that I will ever be, even if I have a song that's about my dog dying. I'm going to have to be the one singing the song and it's going to be a different song every time it's sung.

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All of this reminds me a lot of *I am a Cinematographer* and what that song says. Did you ever do any onstage acting?

Yeah, I did done tons of on-stage acting from the age of 9 to 19.

And after that?

And after that – pretty much none. Once I left home I didn't do any more stage acting. When I was starting out, there was a great repertory theatre here in Louisville called the Actors Studio of Louisville. And in the '80s it was like in its heyday and, to some extent, it was still a good time for live theatre in general. There were plays that were performed in Louisville – with actors that came to Louisville to perform. I got cast in *Matewan* because a casting person saw me on stage at this theatre. And I had already seen Mary McDonnell and I had already seen Chris Cooper, on stage, here in Louisville. And so it was super-exciting, but even by 1988/89, when I was leaving home and beginning to go and experience the world outside of the house that I grew up in, I could sense that there was a diminishing of certain kinds of vitality and certain kinds of power that theatre had in the early '80s and mid-'80s.

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And that scared me and I thought, "Well, I definitely don't want to work in a theatre company that is either exclusively performing to other members of the theatre community or performing to wealthy subscription theatre-goers." Neither of those things felt okay to me, so I didn't get into any theatre stuff after I graduated. I wanted to do something where I have a relationship with the audience as well as with the production.

You clearly have a strong relationship to film, and your music is very visually and emotionally evocative. Have you ever considered, or would you ever consider, working as a director.

I was on a plane a couple of days ago when I was flying back from the Netherlands and I saw this movie called *The Lunchbox*. Do you know this movie?

Yeah.

And it always seemed to me completely baffling – the urge to be a director – because it just seems so daunting. Like I've said, in making records I'm kind of so involved with many, if not all of the aspects of writing, recording, releasing and promoting. And to imagine trying to do that with film just sounds too crazy, like I wouldn't be able to handle it.

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And then, for some reason, just like in the last week, I thought that the place to get in your brain is where you trusted other people to get shit done. And I don't know...maybe if there was a producer partner who said, "You don't need to be worried about that." But otherwise, no. I mean, I love performing. I love performing more than writing. I love singing and being at the mercy of the text.

"Being at the mercy of the text." That's a great note to finish with.

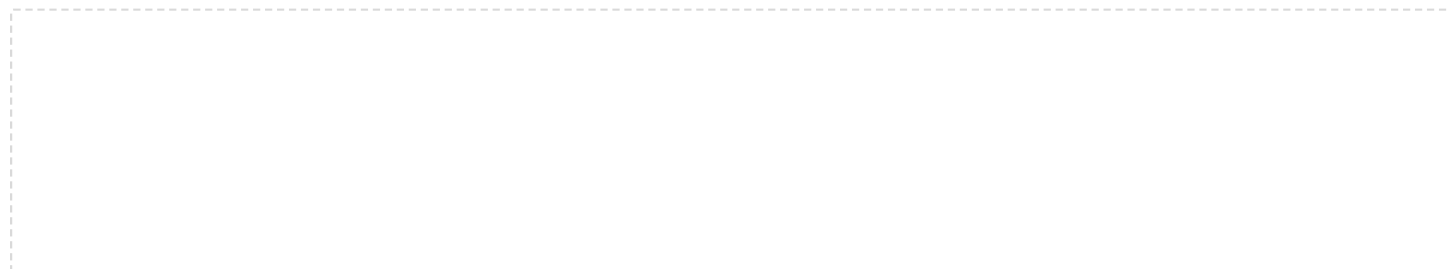
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