

Seminar 6: Advice and recommendations for artists

– Working across borders and how diversity can be a key to success –

Transcript

[00:00] Speaker 1

So, hello everyone, my name is Tom Hugo. I'm a Norwegian songwriter and artist and I'm very happy to present a bit about what I do and share some tips of how to make it as an artist. So, I'm going to start this presentation very soon, just going to open my keynote. So, if you have questions just write, put up your hand, or wait till the end of the session. Here we go...

[00:52] Speaker 1

So, I called the lecture 'Know how I did it so you can do it too, how thinking outside the box and collaborating beyond borders can help you reached your goals as a creative'. Now, a bit about how I did it.

[01:15] Speaker 1

So, as I said, my name is Tom Hugo I'm 42 years old and I'm from Norway, and my socials are **@tomhugo**. This picture here is from my first solo album in 2011, I'll come back to that later. So, what I am is a multi-platinum recording artist/singer, I'm currently in a band called 'Keiino' which is doing very well in Norway. I started out very early. I'm also a songwriter/producer meaning I write songs and produce music for other artists than myself. This is something I started a bit later in my career, but I'm also a manager and head of record label. So, I have a lot of hats that I wear, and I put on the right hat whenever it's needed.

[02:13] Speaker 1

I think a lot of musicians or 'do it yourself' artists need to have a lot of hats. Some people are more comfortable having that and others aren't, but I think it's a good experience as an artist to know a little bit about everything – I will also be coming back to that. So, let's start.

[02:34] Speaker 1

'My way to success'. Even though I'm not Lady Gaga or any Swedish hitmaker, I still make a living out of being a creative, writing songs, and singing on stage. However, the path has been long. I started singing when I was about 5 or 6 years old. I was sitting in front of my mother's stereo set listening through all her records. I remember just touching all the LP's. She had a lot of old music, like 70s music such as ABBA, Michael Jackson, Beatles, and really got sucked into it all. I was about 5 or 6, and I figured out that this was what I wanted to do, and I started singing songs by myself and started playing the guitar and piano. I also started a school band.

[03:45] Speaker 1

When I was 11 or so, I starred in my first rock band, and I think up to my teens I played in different bands and when I was 18, I won a local songwriter competition. I was interviewed in the biggest newspaper in Norway and the headline was 'Tom Hugo wants to be a popstar'. I was 18 and little did I know that it would actually take 21 years before I could actually call myself a popstar and reach number 1 in the sales charts in Norway and known by everyone there.

[04:30] Speaker 1

So, I never thought it would happen so far ahead in time, but still, I hung in there. The thing about when you try to make a career in the creative business is that the road is very winding, and you really never know. You will have a goal and may have a specific way of getting there but usually it never goes like that. It's usually somewhere in between you go through different things. For me, it was a lot of things.

[05:14] Speaker 1

It was not how I planned it at all. I thought that I was supposed to be a pop artist in my early teens. I had a band then a solo career, I moved to Germany and tried to make it as a solo artist. I had a song that did very well in German radio, and I thought that was going to be my moment. I did some concerts, but nothing really happened. I was in this bubbling phase. One of the reasons it never happened was that I was not honest with myself.

[05:55] Speaker 1

Back then I tried to hide my personality because I knew from a very young age that I was not straight, although I used to have girlfriends. When I was interviewed as an artist, I got questions about how I liked the girls in that country, and I played along even though deep within I knew that I looked at boys the way straight men looked at girls. I was hiding myself because I got a tip from a German guy in a record company who suggested that I don't publicise that because Germany was not ready for me to be open.

[06:37] Speaker 1

Anyways, since I wasn't able to be 100% honest and I think that honesty as a creative is one of the most important things. If you're not honest with yourself people will look through you. So, in a way, my solo career didn't go that well and this happened. If you don't know my story it might seem very weird. But the thing is, when you're a recording artist, singer, songwriter, there are other options than just performing and recording your own songs. I wasn't aware of just how big the creative industry is.

[07:28] Speaker 1

In 2012 I went to a song writing camp which is like a workshop where songwriters and producers from all over the world come together and get hired as freelancers from record labels. In my case it was labels from Korea and Japan who were looking for songs for their groups. They would ask for songs of a specific kind of mood like a Christmas single for example. Then we would get together and get as creative as we can for 2 or 3 days, record a lot of music and send it to the record label. Maybe they pick and record your song and just maybe it becomes a hit. You really never know if you're going to get paid at the end, but if you do you get paid very well. Especially if it's a Korean or Japanese artist.

[08:25] Speaker 1

So, in 2012 I tried writing songs for other artists and a year later I had one big hit with a band called 'SHINee'. I'll try to play you a bit of that song which is quite different from what I did as a solo artist. (SHINee – Sunny Day Hero)

[10:08] Speaker 1

Anyway, I tried to show you a song from SHINee, my first song released in Japan and became a big hit. After that I had 2 or 3 more hits with Japanese artists. What I did then was a bit of travelling and writing music for other people and that was something completely different from what I originally planned but that's what made me a career. However, after a while when you are off route from what you're trying to do for yourself then you want to get back on route.

[10:50] Speaker 1

Though this time I didn't want to do it as a solo artist. So, I formed a band called 'Keiino' consisting of me, Alexandra Rotan, and Fred Buljo and this was a bit of a weird consolation. I had an idea for a song I believed could win Eurovision. For those of you who don't know about Eurovision it is the biggest music competition in Europe where European countries send songs which are viewed by 200 million people every year.

[11:26] Speaker 1

What happened is that we were an unknown band and had a song called 'Spirit in the Sky' which won the Norwegian competition. After that we were sent to the international final in Tel Aviv where we got the most votes from the audience. However, the judges didn't like what we did, and we finished in 6th place. Although we didn't win, this resulted in us gaining a lot of streams for our music, we were at number 2 on the Spotify worldwide charts, top of the Norwegian charts and other European countries. This was not my original dream as a child, but this still happened because I held onto that dream and became ok with things not going the way I expected them to. Maybe that's because I was older, either way I learnt a lot from that experience and that if you reach out and collaborate with other people, it might be easier for you to reach your goal.

[12:34] Speaker 1

Right now, my band and I have 83 million streams on Spotify, 100 million streams on Apple music, we're 3x platinum in Norway, and released 23 songs, we're travelling around the world touring, we're ultimately a very active band. So, how can you do this? How can you become a successful artist or creative in whatever you do? I've broken it down to a couple of things.

[13:13] Speaker 1

Skill up meaning get better. Team up meaning collaborate. My third point is to adjust. So, with skill up I mean learn a bit about all aspects of your career. If you're a creative of some sort, a visual artist or musical artist, you probably know a lot about your craft and spend a lot of time doing better in what you do.

[14:06] Speaker 1

However, in my experience I've come to learn that it is benefits you to know a bit about the things surrounding your craft. For example, as a singer it's not just writing songs and performing on stage. You have a lot around you in order to get your product up to the best level, which means you have to have good sound technicians. At some point you will need to work with musicians or producers, so in order to do your craft better you need to know a little about what the sound engineers or publishers or marketers do. Because when these people share the results of their job with you, you need to be able to speak to them and share your input. The same goes with you if you're a visual artist and learning about galleries and more.

[15:16] Speaker 1

That can also include learning about writing grants because in many European countries you can get scholarships and other help along the way. Learning about budgeting is also important because it will make it much easier for you to sustain your career by knowing about the external costs and how to balance them. You don't need to be an expert about all the other things surrounding your craft, but it makes it much easier for you when discussing results with your manager or publicist. Learn the language of the people you work with, take the time to do this.

[17:15] Speaker 1

An additional thing is 'knowing your audience'. To know who you are performing or painting for is important. Also, learning about the country in which you are performing or debuting in will help you.

Like learning about the culture and folklore so you can utilize that in your Art and gain inspiration from it. This will help you better export your Art to that country. Also, learning about what has been successful in the past, learning about the history of the pop culture, which has been successful because these movements come back in cycles. And, generally learning about what's trending at the moment will be beneficial so you can use that in your Art too.

[20:10] Speaker 1

Ultimately look back and think ahead but never copy. You can be inspired by other people. So, if you see people selling apples and you're selling oranges, maybe at that moment it's time for you to sell apples. Just do your research and know what's happening because that'll make it easier for you to fit into the market.

[20:46] Speaker 1

The second point is to adapt and adjust. As I told you in the beginning, I had a clear goal for how my career was supposed to go as a kid, however, it never happened that way. So, know your destination but adjust the route. As a sailor if you know the destination you can set your course, but you always have to adjust the route due to the winds, which are out of your control.

[21:25] Speaker 1

So, take a chameleon, for example, which has been on earth for more than 60 million years which is quite long for an animal, but this is because it has managed to adapt. This applies to people as well as you will dress differently in an office from outside of it. You are not taking away your identity by adapting to your environment or market you're working in. Lady Gaga is a good example due to her versatility. She's been in a meat dress, in a gala, a Rockstar. When you're able to adjust to your environment you have a much bigger chance to make it in the Art industry.

[22:25] Speaker 1

You see I've adjusted as well, there's different parts of me. This is when we did a kid's video, and this other photo is when we did a photoshoot. I'm the same guy telling the same stories however I adapt to where I am. So as a creative, it's your purpose in life to think outside the box, step off the highway and create new paths. With that I mean think outside the box which is also a way of adapting. When you're on your way to your goal and see that maybe you're not going in the right direction you want it to or as quickly, just try to think differently. I know it's much easier said than done but the best ideas are not forced. With that I mean that you can have great work morale, go to the studio every morning at 9am and leave at 5pm for 10 years and still not have a hit. Whereas you could be in the studio for 10 days and suddenly, have the biggest selling song in the world. You have to balance work and the inspiration.

[24:04] Speaker 1

If you are a creative, you need these inputs in order to create these special things. So, my suggestion is to travel and do weird or crazy things, the things you wouldn't always think of doing and that aren't directly related to your craft. Also engaging into other creative activities, if you're a musician engage in painting because these will contribute to your creative toolbox.

[25:07] Speaker 1

Many athletes agree with this because they say when you train your brain whilst learning a new skill, even if it's not what you're actually supposed to do it helps you reach your goal. Finding yourself and what's special about you is also an important thing.

[25:30] Speaker 1

For me I never really felt special as an artist or songwriter, maybe my special thing was that I dream melodies all the time and know a bit about many things and like to bring people together, that's my

special skill. I'm an ok singer, I don't have the best voice in the world, I'm a good song writer but I'm not the greatest. I can organize things but I'm definitely not the best manager. All in all, that's my thing. However, one of the people in my band she's an amazing singer so that's her thing. So, find what's special about you and make that a story.

[26:18] Speaker 1

Some people create a persona whilst others keep it real. You can always make up your special quality, it all depends on what you're comfortable with but in any case, be honest. If you're going to put up a lie saying you're something you're not you have to be confident saying that in interviews and knowing that when you get back home.

[26:55] Speaker 1

This is one of the most important things to me, to team up and collaborate with other creatives. That has made my career much better and is actually why I made a career for myself. As an artist, I was struggling in the beginning because I had these ideas and did not want to share them with anybody or get their input, but two heads think better than one – in most cases.

[27:30] Speaker 1

There are different ways of collaborating. You can have a fixed partnership like a little team you work with or an open relationship where you work alone but sometimes collaborate with others in all fields of Art. All these little things that bring spice to your life will enrich your craft. Also, cooperatives, you can still be a solo artist, work as a team and share workspace etc.

[28:17] Speaker 1

Diversity within the team is very important because when you try to team up, it's very common that you try to do it with people who are the same as you and maybe it's easier for you. However, if you widen your horizons and look at things from a new perspective you have a much bigger chance to find success as an artist. For instance, when I started Keiino, I got in touch with a Sami/rapper/yoyker called Fred Buljo, a Sami is the north indigenous people of Norway. I thought that collaboration would bring an indigenous element into pop music.

[29:12] Speaker 1

I also reached out to Alexandra Rotan coming from the EDM space. She was the live singer of Alan Walker. Because we came from different angles, when we came together in Keiino, magic happened. If you do that you avoid the 'echo-chamber' or fan-feedback because if you only collaborate with people you know you get the same feedback and your fanbase won't grow. It also increases your chances to make a hit because people from different cultures can expose you to different perspectives of your Art.

[30:04] Speaker 1

You also learn how to defend your choices because sometimes your original idea is the optimal one and you learn how to stand for yourself. So how to make the collaborations, I am a collaboration man. You need to know your team, their skills, background, and network because knowing that will help you understand how to make the best of that collaboration and give you the best result. Also listen vs Talk and adjust from solo work.

[31:12] Speaker 1

Solo work is very different from collaborating because it's about killing your babies. For me it was hard to share my ideas, but I learnt that sometimes people have better ideas than I did. So don't be afraid to share your best ideas and kill your babies. As a creative you might want to be very secretive about your ideas thinking people want to steal from you, but you need to remember that in many cases your best idea is yet to be formed. The chances are you'll have an even better idea the next time you create.

[32:00] Speaker 1

Remember that 10% of an apple is always better than 100% of a failed start up, meaning maybe it is that little point someone else made that would've made the difference to your art. So that was my presentation of how to make it as a successful artist. So, if you have any questions or feedback please shoot and I'm very happy to answer it.

[32:43] Speaker 2

Thank you so much Tom I really loved it. I especially loved the first part where you said that things changed for you when you became your authentic self, that's amazing to hear. When you think about the number one moment of your career as an artist, a collaboration which really changed your life, what was it?

[32:25] Speaker 1

I think for me it was 2 things. I remember when I was in the studio hearing Fred Yolky for the first time. When I heard that in 'Spirit in the Sky' I knew that this was it, that would change my life. I was 38 and had been working all my life and knew that it was special, and when we won in Norway, I saw how the ball was rolling and I was on the other side of it that was the big change for me definitely.

[34:11] Speaker 2

That sounds exciting. Guys, if you have any question do not hesitate to jump into the discussion or write in the chat. Tom, I have another question. What would be your main advice for musicians or upcoming artists?

[34:35] Speaker 1

It is definitely to be honest with yourself and be brave and know that it's such a cliché but, never give up. You'll have that voice in your head saying you're not good enough or it's not worth it. Maybe it'll never be the way you envisioned it, but I have a lot of good friends who never took that chance and they have regrets when looking back on their lives. Whilst the people who tried are much more at ease and happy. So, try and do not be afraid of failure.

[35:39] Speaker 2

Well, Tom thank you so much for today it was amazing to talk with you. If anyone wants to get in contact with Tom, you can connect to him through our website. So, thank you so much Tom it was lovely having you here.

[36:10] Speaker 1

Thank you for having me and yeah just get in touch.