Alex Cameron on being an unreliable narrator



September 18, 2017 – Alex Cameron is a musician, singer, and songwriter from Sydney, Australia. He is best known for his shape-shifting persona and for offering narratives voiced by roster of shifty, generally unlikable narrators. On his most recent album, *Forced Witness*, Cameron (along with saxophonist and "business partner" Roy Molloy) offer his most pointed collection of songs to date—an evisceration of what it means to be a straight white male. "It all comes from listening and discussing and having conversations with people, no matter how painful those conversations sometimes are," says Cameron, "Whether I'm talking to some jock homophobe from my high school, or if I'm talking to my brother who has gone a bit off the deep end on the internet. Things like that provide me a sense of what might be a small constellation of tragedies that end up making a bigger picture."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2303 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Identity.

Do you find that audiences are sometimes confused by what you do? In the beginning it was hard to tell if Alex Cameron was a persona, or if it was just you.

I think that was potentially happening towards the beginning of it. But, to my surprise, the music seemed to take over in importance. The music became the focus. That was something that led me to focus on the fact that maybe the songs were strong enough that we could just continue to tour without having to ham up some kind of pony act. There was always an element of storytelling in the way I present the music, there always is, but the more we perform the more genuine it becomes.

Your songs often involve complicated narratives. What draws you to that mode of songwriting?

I was always told to write down things I was thinking. My mom always told me to "write it down, write it down." I suppose I was always going to be a writer. I was not very good at school. I was not even very good at English class, but I was good at creative writing.

I was drawn towards writing short stories because when I worked full-time in offices, I felt the need to get a lot of what was happening in my mind out onto paper. It was just a habit. I think I wrote around 100,000 words in 2013, or something like that. A lot of that writing created a foundation for what was going to end up being in the first two records. I really want to make music with a purpose and the idea of that purpose comes from having a narrative—a sensible, coherent, and clear narrative. I don't like ambiguity. I think the need for storytelling comes from the fact that I like clarity.

Your songs are very effective in the sense that they're generally hyper specific, but they also manage to say something very clearly about the larger culture. You can appreciate the micro-narratives in the songs on their own, but ultimately they say something much bigger.

I'm a fan of the unreliable narrator. It's such a classic way to tell a story, plus it's not a stretch for me to take on a different persona. I've always felt pretty willing to put myself on the line. I also don't take for granted that, however small it is, we've got a platform—a place to express ideas and tell stories from. We're pretty committed to a dexterous and flexible sort of story telling, but also one that, like you said, is very specific.

I think a weak story is a really broad one that doesn't actually touch on specific issues. A character needs to have microscopic, inherent flaws for a story to have an individual tragedy to it. If the small individual tragedies that we end up writing about happen to be, in some way, reflective of what's happening on a greater scale, that's up to the listener. Our job is just to tell a story. I try not to focus on the grander ideas, at least not in the stories anyway. It has to be specific for it to be relatable.

Also, the idea of a song preaching is tiresome to me. I've had a lot of people in my life who've been ineffective preachers. They've either been fueled by anger, or by frustration or by some sort of elated sense of righteousness. A good story doesn't judge its characters. A good story tells the story as it is. The idea is that it can be enjoyed and the viewer or the audience can judge it. That's what folk stories are. Folk stories generally come with a moral, but you're relying on the readers as a compass.

Do you collect these stories and keep them in your pocket until it's time to start fleshing them out as songs?

A lot of them come from conversations. Because of that, my songs end up being quite like dialogue. I also like to create my own clichés so that they sound timeless. I'll invent sayings as if the character says that kind of thing all the time. I just like playing with language.

As I mentioned, I did work at a legal office for a few years. I was reading about people's problems, which always seemed to do with domestic violence. There were a lot of marital problems. I was often dealing with people in positions of authority who would commit an act of misconduct. The corrupt nature of that seemed to be a moral problem, a deviant one. That was what inspired a lot of this writing. I felt like I had a license to do it because I worked with these people who were actually saying these sorts of things. Part of my job was editing long interviews with people, interrogations. These were the things that were coming out of people's mouths. So that stuff inspired a lot of my work, but also just having really good conversations with close friends. I'm trying to get to the bottom of that sense of dread that I have from time to time.

Often the narratives in the songs are fairly grim, but they are set against these really catchy pop melodies. It's an interesting contrast. You get kind of sucked in by the music and don't notice right away how fucked up the story actually is.

Again, it comes back to that same thing. I'll never listen to someone telling a story unless they do it with tact and art and unless they do it with charm. I'll never appreciate someone's message unless I can appreciate the way that person is expressing it. There's such a thing as artful storytelling. That still exists. Unless you can convince people to commit to you emotionally then it's going to be hard to get a message across.

Your new record in particular is a pretty razor sharp indictment of what people would commonly call toxic masculinity. It really speaks to the last gasps of what it is to be a stereotypical straight white man. There is a very fine line between mocking something and perhaps unwittingly aggrandizing it. If you don't do it right, the entire thing can totally be read the wrong way.

I'm absolutely aware of the responsibility that I've given myself. I have to maintain a pretty solid perspective in order to get it right. At the same time, you said last gasp but you never know if it's actually going to be the last gasp. You've got to try and put the final nail in that coffin. Our goal is to tell true stories, but to have some kind of influence on the movement away from what we write about.

How is it to go out and perform these songs over and over? Do you have a sense right away of whether people are really getting it?

It's really quite positive. I mean you have to be aware, the reason why I'm singing these songs is because our audience is primarily straight and white and lots of dudes. We play at festivals to seas of white people. There's no other way of putting it. I would love that to change over time, but as it stands, we're kind of asking how can we possibly have a positive impact on things. I think a lot of people are going silent because they feel like they are part of the problem, and in many ways they are.

It's interesting too how many buttons these topics push, even among people who fancy themselves really open-minded liberals—particularly straight white men.

There is definitely plenty of room for guys to shut the fuck up. In the dialogue there's also room for listening as well. For sure. Absolutely. This is what we're talking about here. We're talking about not being aggressive with your message and also being open to learning. You know, I'm a straight, white man and I have to be open to learning about what my impact is on the world, indirectly or because of the people around me. I have to be open to learning about those things. Just listening is a huge part of that.

When you're doing this kind of work where you're telling these complicated stories, do you worry about how they're received? Is it important for you to understand what people's

takeaway is?

We talk about this a lot. It's certainly something that we think about because I have no interest in being an artist that's like, "It's none of your business what it's about." In fact, that is entirely what it's about. If people listen to it and don't care to listen for the lyrics that's kind of their problem, but I write these songs with the intention of them being understood fully. I write with the intention of them having the impact emotionally that I've intended.

How did you begin writing songs? Was this always the way you operated?

I started playing Roy Orbison songs on guitar, that's basically how I started doing this whole thing. A lot of what I'm informed by is the story, in terms of short stories, and narratives. I guess I also felt like having access to a lot of the personalities that end up on the record and just listening to them. It all comes from listening and discussing and having conversations with people, no matter how painful those conversations sometimes are, whether I'm talking to some jock homophobe from my high school, or if I'm talking to my brother who has gone a bit off the deep end on the internet. Things like that provide me a sense of what might be a small constellation of tragedies that end up making a bigger picture.

We don't want to lose sense of the fact that these stories can be much bigger than the minute details. They can be a thread that goes from an awful person and through their victim in a story and project a bigger image of who we all are as a species. I'm hopeful of the right direction. I'm not blind to the fact that an amount of change has to happen from here.

Do listeners to want to conflate the speaker in in the songs—the first person I—with you as a person?

Well, it probably helped that I wore a plastic face for the first couple of years, that I didn't have to confront that as a thing. Now that we get up on stage and the line is a little blurred in the presentation, I guess there has to be some sense of believability in the way it's presented. Like I said, I'm not interested in hokeyness or hammyness; I'm just interested in quality of words, and it helps live that I also get to talk to the audience. I get to explore the ideas in the songs a little more with dialogue, talking to the audience about it, which I enjoy doing.

I was talking about our song "Marlon Brando" at a show, which is a song about a bully who keeps digging a hole socially because he doesn't have access to the correct mode of discussion. He's a bit of a fool, but also is saying some hateful things because he's confused and a bit of an animal. I'll have straight, white guys yell out—it's *always* straight, white guys—yell out things like, "We're not all bad!" or one guy yelled out, "You're an asshole!"

This isn't really a men's support group, this is a live show where I'm going to present to you some songs, and there can be some ideas in the songs. Try and take something away from it, don't automatically be on the defensive. I'm not being on the defensive, I'm being quite progressive with my songwriting because I'm willing to talk about it. I'm willing to discuss it. I'm willing to learn from it. These songs are case studies. These are little investigations into an individual's mindset and I'm willing to be the voice that broadcasts those findings.

Alex Cameron recommends:

My number one is a book by Harry Crews called A Feast of Snakes which really opened my eyes to how a writer could explore something toxic from a first person perspective—or at least from a single character's perspective. Just really remarkable storytelling.

The second is another book called Karoo by Steve Tesich, which again is a male perspective thing, but is very important to me.

The record Excitable Boy by Warren Zevon, which has really powerful moments of enlightened storytelling. It's willing to go very deep and dark.

Dire Straits' self-titled debut album. That's a real winner. The song "Wild West End" on that record is remarkable.

The Australian film *Chopper* is a great example of shining a light on a really fucked up psyche in a way that's also really enlightening. There are these moments of humanity where you're like, "Maybe this guy's a good guy? Maybe? I don't know, I'm trying to figure it out," and then you're like, "Oh no, okay this guy's a sick fuck." I like what it did with the whole criminal trope, especially in that it avoided doing what *Scarface* did, where now a bunch of dumb guys have *Scarface* posters up on their wall because they fucking missed the point. No one has *Chopper* posters, even though it actually tells a similar story. You don't glorify them these characters but you don't demonize them either. Let the actual story do the work of demonizing them. If you write the right story, it'll do the work.

Name
Alex Cameron

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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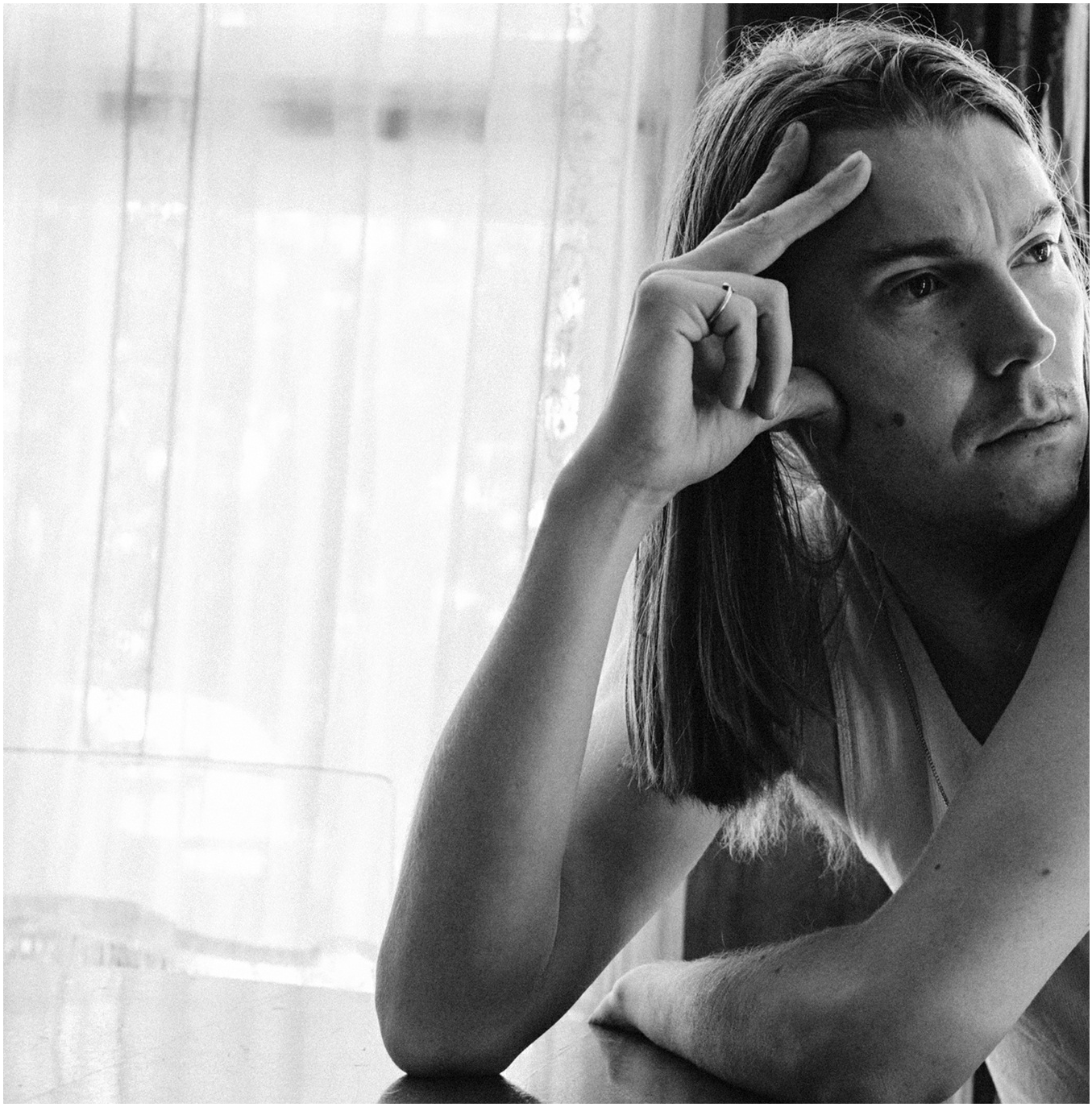


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