Beach House on creating your own world



July 17, 2017 - Beach House is a Baltimore-based band comprised of vocalist/keyboardist Victoria Legrand and guitarist Alex Scally. Since forming in 2004 the band have released six full-length albums. This summer the duo released the self-explanatory *B-Sides and Rarities*. When asked to explain the deeply intimate nature of the band's creative process, Legrand offers the following: "It's very strange, sometimes. It feels like one mind, two bodies, four hands."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2353 words.

Tags: Music, Focus, Inspiration, Process, Collaboration, Success.

Your band is off the road and in-between albums. Does that mean you're working on new music or are you taking a break?

Victoria: It's not super busy, but we're always working on stuff. I think it's just normal. We're not really off right now. We're not on vacation or anything. Something I've realized about us is that when we say we're taking time off, it's not ever as long as we think it's going to be.

Alex: There's something about getting a little bit older where it starts to feel like once you stop, you die.

Victoria: That's what John Waters said to us. He said, "Don't blink."

Alex: When we were younger, we would get back from tour, and be like, "That was so exhausting. I'm not going to do anything for like a month." Now the idea of a month without doing anything is this horror of wasted time that you'll never get back.

Do you have a pretty regimented way of working?

Victoria: Now we're trying to work together a couple times a week. Alex goes into the studio pretty often, much more often than I do, but currently we're trying to meet two or three times a week. I think that it's important for it to not to feel like a negative thing. It never feels like a job. We're even more skilled now at making sure that things feel extremely natural, and that we're working on stuff as we wish, and when we want, and it I think it really helps to keep things feeling light, hopeful.

Alex: It's almost weird. We've gotten very pro at managing inspiration. We've definitely had experiences of burning out a little bit too much, and going down pointless alleys for too long.

Victoria: We've been guilty of being too meticulous about certain things or getting too upset about things that were pointless, getting too frustrated too soon, creating a lot of anguish that was probably a little unnecessary. I think that's part of getting older—that you do things, and then you *don't* do them. You hopefully don't do them again the same way.

Alex: Also, the rising world chaos at the moment seems to make everything feel more urgent.

Victoria: Yeah, urgently make some art. Or urgently tell someone that you care about them, or urgently take care of yourself or someone else. Urgently sit down.

Success can make art-making increasingly complicated. Bands often grapple with issues like, "Well, we need to try and top the thing we did before," or, "This is what people like about us, so we need to really hone in on doing that again." How did you guys sidestep that? Or do you feel like you did sidestep that?

Victoria: I think the only moment where it felt slightly like that was after *Teen Dream*. We wanted to run as quickly as possible from whatever was beginning to happen, which was maybe us being slightly turned into something that felt a little bit like not truly who we were. Compared to problems other bands have, it was a very minimal thing, but that's how sensitive we were about how we felt we would be perceived, and how we wanted to be perceived, and also what we would want to be remembered for. We didn't want that work to be some definitive work. That was the only time in our career so far, where we had that kind of mentality of, "Whatever happens next has to be not necessarily better, but we have to move on. We have to move forward."

I think ever since then we've been lucky, because I think we did manage to regain some kind of private, innocent, creative safe space, away from business, away from opinions, and away from bad advice. We managed to get back to this world that we had innocently created together. Since around 2010 or 2011 we've been securely back in our own little world and it's a place that, at least for me, has gotten deeper and become more profound. It's much more special to me now than ever before. I feel like somehow we survived something, and it wasn't even a crisis, it was just this subtle moment where things could have gone in a different direction. I think in everyone's career there's a moment where you can make so many compromises, and some of them will be fine compromises, but other ones will actually cause you to suffer. You will lose your identity. You'll lose your language. You'll use your ability to communicate creatively. For Alex and I it would have been, how do we work together? How do we talk to one another?

Somehow we got that back and I think touring helped a lot. There's so many crazy things that happen, so many little ups and downs, but it's mostly just incredibly hard work that is, at the end of the day, incredibly invigorating and cathartic. I think that stuff really helped retain a lot of meaning in what we were doing. We never were isolated long enough to become neurotic and overly analytical about what we were doing. We were able to work constantly, and I think that keeps you focused inwards, and less preoccupied with success. We've been very lucky.

Do you find, when it's just the two of you in your space making music together, that your way of song-making, or even your way of communicating with each other, has changed a lot since you started making music together?

Victoria: Yes. It's always changing and it's also always surprising us, too. I think we are still finding new ways of working together. It's not something predictable. Yesterday we were were talking about this, I was saying, "Isn't this funny how we're doing this now?" Or, "This is different than it used to be. I like this. I'm glad we're doing things this new way." I think you never stop getting close to somebody. In any partnership it's a lot of hard work, but when you get past the fact that it's hard work, there's this nice oasis where it does feel effortless and you get these little surprises.

Alex: Yeah. We're like two brick layers. When they were young, they had a lot of energy, and worked really long days and had to discuss how to lay down every single brick, but then when they got older, they didn't have to really speak to be able to communicate deeply, and they worked more melodiously. I don't know why I'm thinking of masons.

Victoria: Bricklayers. Yes.

That's such a beautiful notion, that creative partnerships are often like friendship or romantic relationships. It evolves over time. One of the nicest things is when it starts to feel symbiotic, when you can communicate without speaking.

Victoria: Sometimes you can just tell by the expression on someone's face. You are listening to something. You turn around. You see that there is either no facial expression, or that there is a question mark, and then sometimes you just know exactly what it means, because we're thinking about the exact same thing. Or you're watching someone else work, but somehow by watching them work on something, it's like you're a part of it, too. It's very strange, sometimes. It feels like one mind, two bodies, four hands.

The reason why I've always said we're lucky is because I think there are hurdles you have to get through to get to that place, and I think it is unfair, to some extent, because not all people make it through any relationship long enough to reach that point. You get through painful things, but then you get to this place where things are fluid. I don't think fluidity

is sustainable either, though. I think that you will always find some kind of obstacle or thing to work through, and it's not like when we're working it's this constant paradise. It's just that, like Alex said, when you lay bricks for enough years, you start to have patterns in how you do things, so the hurdles aren't as traumatizing.

What does it mean to be successful?

Victoria: If we are continuing to make art or music and it's still resonating with us in a meaningful way—and it truly feels like it's coming out of *us*—and someone else on the other end responds to it in an emotional way, that means the ideas are worth pursuing and there is still a cycle going on. That's always been our success meter.

Alex: It's easy to get caught up in, "Whoa, all of a sudden we're selling a lot of records and playing big venues!" It's very flattering for anyone, but it can also be a double-edged sword of feeling like you're losing a real connection to anyone out in the audience and you're becoming some kind of product. For us success has always been related to honesty. Do you believe in the song? Do you believe in the feeling? Do you still feel the feeling as you're making it, recording it, releasing it, performing it?

Victoria: Not losing touch with your fans is a kind of success. I imagine when you get more and more massive, if you play arenas or something, that it gets a lot harder to visualize who's out there, who's listening, who's coming, what young people even look like. You stop being able to see where your music's going. That must have an effect on what you produce. It's always been inspiring imagining the world that people are in when they're listening to music, or when I'm listening to music—where am I? What colors am I looking at? I feel like the farther you get away from that base, the harder it is to understand why you're making it, and where is it going. I think that's when it becomes dangerous, perhaps.

I think when we did those installation shows, which were very small shows, that was one of our many attempts to keep things alive and interesting. To not just be playing thousand person clubs, but playing smaller places to stoke those embers inside of ourselves, to challenge ourselves and keep things small. I think keeping things small to some extent makes things more secure.

Alex: We have this joke that we always talk about: the bell curve. I feel like most artists' careers look like bell curves. Having spent years now in this band, we're often a little nostalgic about the early days because it was so innocent and so beautiful—just trucking out on tour time after time again and really enjoying it. Back then we'd always have friends go along with us and it felt so cosmic, like exactly what we should be doing. So we do have this ridiculous fantasy about the *other* side of the bell curve, how we're going to be in our 60s and once again playing in shit holes, getting yelled at by the sound engineer. That sounds nostalgic, but it's not really. It's more just about purity. I think we'll always worship a certain purity, and try to maintain it.

With Beach House you've not only created your own creative world, but also sort of defined your own singular aesthetic. What advice would you have for young bands in that regard?

Victoria: No one asks us for advice. [*laughs*]

Alex: Honestly, I just think it has to come from inside, and not from outside. You can't just listen to a record you like and try to emulate it, as tempting as that is. You have to find out what you like. You have to make art that is you, that inspires you, that explains you in some way. I think all people experience that and figure that out differently. Some people, unfortunately, when they go to make what they like, they really just copy something they like, and they can't find the thing inside themselves that *is* them.

It's also a matter of finding the right people to collaborate with. Often I'll meet really good musicians, but something is still missing. Very few people are actually the total package. Maybe you can write great lyrics or you can sing or you can play really well or you are a good producer, but most people can't actually do all of those things. A lot of people I know who have really cool, creative existences, it's because they found the right person or people to fill out what they lack. Maybe you haven't found the right collaborator yet.

Victoria: Absolutely. Because it is trial and error and it is also luck, that's why advice is only good to a certain extent. It's really just a journey for each individual.If you find something that truly inspires you, bow down to it. Respect it. Love it. Cherish it. But then allow for your own interpretation of what that means. Maybe you'll discover through music that you're actually a painter, so maybe you should do that instead of trying to be a rock star. Maybe you're something else. I think that it's just about asking questions, but also producing things and making stuff. It's the only way, really, to find out who and what you should be. You should be making lots of work, not just making one thing and hoping that it'll be successful. Sometimes you have to make lots of bad things in order to get to that one good thing, but it's never a waste of time. Being creative, making things, figuring yourself out—that's never a waste of time.

ESSENTIAL BEACH HOUSE

"Master of None" — from *Beach House* (2006)
"Heart of Chambers" — from *Devotion* (2008)
"Silver Soul" — from *Teen Dream* (2010)
"Myth" — from *Bloom* (2012)
"Wildflower" — from *Depression Cherry* (2015)
"Elegy to the Void" — from *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (2015)
"Chariot" — from *B-Sides and Rarities* (2017)

Name
Beach House

Vocation
Musicians

Fact

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Shawn Brackbill