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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2997 words.

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Björk on creativity as an ongoing experiment

You collaborate with a lot of people, often over a long period of time. How do you find a good collaborator, and what do you think makes a good collaboration?

There's a different story with every collaborator. It's really like friendships. Each friend you have or each person that's in your life, there's a different story to each one, and I truly feel like that.

For me, what really separates it is if it's a visual collaboration or a musical collaboration. I look at myself as a musician. I mean, when I'm sitting in the rocking chair when I'm 100 years old, I'll probably look back at the music side of things as being my work.

My musical collaborators are fewer, but the connection is probably deeper because it's not just friendship and art and games or making things. My musical DNA's kind of my core, you know, and my person. Whomever is up for merging with that musical DNA, it's going to be something that takes more and lasts longer, usually. Of course, everything I'm going to say after this is going to contradict that.

When it comes to Arca, Alejandro, he contacted me at the end of *Biophilia*. It was perfect timing because it was my last *Biophilia* gig. Then I got to know him, personally, and actually be there together. That was the first thing we did in London. We met at the DJ booth and DJ'd an after party for five hours. Then we got to know each other. He first came to Iceland for a few days, and then he came a month later for two weeks—or, I can't remember exactly. It was very gradual, but as we got to know each other, it was just so much in there. Alejandro's so layered, and he's so complicated and enormous, that it was like every time we felt we'd done something, it was like another hill to mount. I think also maybe the magic of it is like we always never expected to last this long. We always just thought, "Okay, we'll just do one more thing and that's it." It was never planned.

When it comes to visual things, it's different. I go back to my band roots, being in a punk band or being part of group where it was very anti-authority. It was like some anarchy, and "everybody's just as important" and no ego nonsense. So maybe my visuals end up being the opposite or something because I'm really flamboyant, and there's a lot of me in there. But I think they still come from that core, and that they are very collaborative, especially when we meet and talk through treatments. Also, just to post the videos, it'll be like 20 group emails, and everybody will have a say. Like for example, with "The Gate," it was a year of talking before it came out.

Also, even though I'm in all the videos, I feel like a stand-in, just for the human being, or something. When we talk about stuff, I'm probably more absorbed by talking about textures and colors, and if they work with the rhythm of the song or the textures of the flutes. What's more fun for me is the sort of crafty, upfront side to it. My role in it is often just like the last email, or something.

I think the best connections or collaborations are when you don't assume anything and there's no projection and there's no pressure and people are not forced up against the wall and like, "This is what we're doing." The few moments where we've found each other in that sort of situation, something was not right. I think where collaboration works best is when you drop all that and you just really start from scratch and you really try to make something that's different than what you've done before, and you try to find a coordinate, which you wouldn't have found on your own or with somebody different. That's when it's

fertile.

I think also with a lot of people I work with, it's sometimes the third thing or the second thing we do together that clicks, and before that it's just foreplay. You kind of know. It's a gut feeling. I think, it's similar to friendships that you'll be in for five years or whatever, and then certainly, if you still have that connection, you will move up to like the next stage, whatever that is.

I've found that, for example, in the videos that me and Andy Huang did together. It started with "Mutual Core" and "Black Lake" and "Family" and ended with "The Gate." We couldn't have done "The Gate" as the first video. It really was like we grew together. We grew together in so many ways. Andy had just done one video before he did "Mutual Core." [laughs] It's been a lot we've done together, and it's been really, really like a dream.

Is it okay to abandon a project?

I think, probably, in my mind, I never abandon an idea. But the reality is that I probably do. If I could just describe my angle on it: You don't expect things to happen. You don't think, "Okay, in a year's time, it's going to be this huge emblem." I try not to presume that. It's more like I'm grateful for every step of the way. You do the one baby step, and you go, "Oh, okay." Then you do another baby step, and you go, "Okay." Then you do another one...

I guess it's a lot about timing. If there isn't the next step, and it doesn't feel right, there will definitely be times where I don't do it. But in my mind, I don't look at it that way. It's more like maybe it could happen in 10 years time. Maybe it could happen in 50 years time. That's the next step. Or somebody else will take it, somebody else will look at it, and it will inspire them to write a poem. I look at it more like that, like it's something that I don't own.

It's an energy that's there—especially in a collaboration. Working on your own, I think that's kind of different. But in collaborations, it's something you can't control. You meet someone, and you feel very fast and very quickly the potential of what this could be. It could be very, very, very abstract and not something you put on a calendar or anything like that, but you can feel the hidden root vegetable there under the ground [laughs], and you kind know the shape of it.

The minute your expectations harden or crystallize, you jinx it. I'm not saying I can always do this, but if I can stay more in the moment and be grateful for every step of the way, then because I'm not expecting anything, nothing was ever abandoned.

Do you get creative blocks, or do you have enough momentum to keep things going?

Well, I think probably what I talk least about is what I'm most protective about, and that's the way I look at my work. Like, 80% of it is my songwriting and my melodies and my lyrics and my arrangements and my production that I do on my own, on my laptop, or I walk outside and pour my melodies. That's something that's always like a mill slowly churning away. It's not fast and it's not slow. It's like, the moments that I've gone to an island, and I'm supposed to write a whole album in a month, I could never, ever do that. I write one song a month, or two months, whatever happens... If there is a happy period or if there's a sad period, or I have all the time in the world or no time in the world, it's just something that's kind of a bubbling underneath.

I think part of it is I started writing melodies as a kid, walking to school and back, and it just always was like my way of coping or dealing with the world. It never was, for me, something that was supposed to exist in the rest of the world or with friends or in school or in the charts or record sales... or whatever you call it... social interaction.

It's almost just like me and myself, so it's kind of like the full moon, which comes once a month. It doesn't change. I think also maybe because I was in bands from 13 or 12, depending on when you start counting, to like 27, which is quite a long time. That's like 15 years. I think all that time, I was a single mom, bringing up a baby, and all I did was write melodies and lyrics. I think that just became something I could do while I was raising a child or shopping errands or doing a normal daily-life routine. It's like another function in my subconscious, and in my brain that's just like rolling away like a screensaver, coexisting next to whatever is happening.

By the time I was 27 and my first solo album came out, that sort of chamber in my in my psyche had developed. As a musician, that songwriting, melody-writing chamber in me had developed since I was a kid. First for a few years and then like 15 years in a band, so it sort of could take anything. When I'm doing crazy touring or videos or just hanging out with friends or whatever I'm doing, that was just almost, just like rolling away in the background. I don't think I have created blocks there—that's just always there.

I think my blocks more have to deal with interacting with the world, or keeping sure that all my work relationships are flowing... you try to understand people and listen. Then to accept that sometimes, some work relationships have a clock attached to them. It's just like a fruit. It's harvest time, and then that's it. It's really sad, but that's the way it goes. You just have to hope that you mature enough that you can let go when things like that happen. I think that's maybe more where I feel that there is blocks, or something that I have to consciously work on.

How do you find space for yourself, and avoid burning out?

Maybe because I had a kid really young, and maybe because I am a singer, I just always would take care of myself. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, I write very ambitious melodies for myself, so I can't do punk vocals to all my songs. I have to make sure my voice keeps all its registers, both the gentle and the brutal, because I like to be free in my voice. It's quite hard. If I would just sing brutally all the time, that wouldn't be so hard, or if I would just always sing gently all the time, that wouldn't be so hard, but I like extremes. I like both gentle and brutal things and to jump between back and forth in the same song; in order to do that vocally, I've always had to take good care of my body.

I remember being in punk bands, or whatever, like some of my first bands touring somewhere in the van in Berlin or whatever, and how sad I felt when I lost my top register. I just felt like, "Oh my god, I'm going to do the concert, and it's going to be no fun. I can give all my brutal notes, but I can't have any delicate details or sensitivity." I would just be really sad when that would happen to me. So I think from very early on, I learned a rhythm of how to take care of myself, but I can still go bonkers and lose the plot in between.

I think also having a kid really young, I'm a bit old-school. I go out once a week, like Friday night. Then the rest of the days, I'm pretty sensible. Just listen to a lot of music and reading a lot of books, so I guess because I'll always have that kind of rhythm, it hasn't changed a lot. It sort of just stays the same. What's great about Reykjavik is you are surrounded still with all the kids I grew up with. Everybody lives like five blocks around me. They've gone to maybe more extreme things, like maybe gone bonkers for 10 years, and then they just go totally clean and sober. I've never had those kind of extremes... It's been the same the whole time.

A quick answer is: It's always a struggle. You always go, "Oh, damn, now I have nothing to do for two days," and then always on the end of the second day it's like, "I'm bored shitless." But you have to force yourself to do that. I think for everybody, that's going to be always something you have to juggle till the end of your life.

How do you know when a project is done? How do you decide when a song is done or when an album is done? Or is it one of those things where even after you've finished it, you kind of want to keep adding to it or keep changing things around? Or in your mind, when something is released, is it like, "Alright, that's done. I can move onto the next project?"

I don't know why, but that has never been a problem for me—I just know. I like things when they're not completely finished. I like it when albums come out. Maybe it's got something to do with being in bands. We spent too long. There were at least one or two albums we made all the songs too perfect, and then we overcooked it in the studio, and then we go and play them live and they're kind of dead. I think there's something in me, like an instinct, that doesn't want the final, cooked version on the album. I want to leave ends open or other versions, which is probably why I end up still having people do remixes, and when I play them live, I feel different and the songs can grow.

There will always be one song on each album, which is maybe a little overcooked, but it's okay. And, maybe there'll be a couple that are a little undercooked, and then I will take those undercooked songs and really maybe towards later down the line, I'll be doing a version of that. Like, let's say I write nine songs a year, then my albums come out every two, three years. If you look at the math of that, every time an album comes out, there's going to be an old song, and there's going to be a brand new song. Then you've just got to work with that.

Looking back at it now, one thing I learned from not doing my first solo album till I was 27 was to try to create an even flow. Like, don't hold your breath for five or seven years and not release anything, and then you've just got clogged up with way too much stuff. I think that's what you gain from that. Maybe you've gained some immaculate, perfect versions of some of the songs, but overall, I think there's more minus to that because of how you clog your own flow. You lose contact to the part of you, your subconscious, that's writing songs all the time, and the part of you that's showing it to the world. As much similarity between those two parts of you, I think, the better. That's more important, to sustain that flow, than to wait until things are perfect.

I was thinking about the way Kanye kept adjusting the *Life of Pablo* after he'd released it.

There's part of me that wanted to release *Utopia* without all the bird songs—just more streamlined. Part of me wanted to release two versions of it, like one was just really clean, with big silences between every song. Then it's the other version, which I released, and which is this kind of journey. We're trying to make it into a journey, that you kind of arrived at this place.

I was going to keep it a secret, but since you mentioned it, I'm kind of tempted. [laughs] What I'm doing now is probably going to do a live version, where I want to take the flutes further, into more sort of a virtuoso acoustic realm, and maybe then I will skip the birds.

What I'm trying to say is that when you release an album, it's important to keep the flow going, and if you have anything extra or new, you use it as fuel for your next thing. I think that's important because if you wait for another six months or something, you might lose momentum with your older songs.

Anytime you release an album, there's going to be some songs that are old and some that are undercooked and some are overcooked. I think it's more important to keep the momentum going and then just move on. Then do different versions of some songs in the live situations.

I find overall, my fans have showed a lot of enthusiasm over how, when I play live, I do different versions of songs, like really different. There isn't necessarily a one correct version of each song. It's an experiment that keeps going.

10 longtime Björk collaborators:

Michel Gondry

Sjón

Alexander McQueen

Arca

Chris Cunningham

asfour

Anohni

Matmos

Gabriela Friðriksdóttir

Dirty Projectors

Name
Björk

Vocation
Musician

Fact



Photo by Jesse Kanda

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