

Jenny Hval on deep collaboration



December 28, 2016 - Jenny Hval is a multidisciplinary Norwegian artist known for producing work that fuses her interests in music, literature, and interactive performance. She has released four critically acclaimed solo albums under her own name, the latest of which, *Blood Bitch*, came out in 2016. She frequently collaborates on videos and performances with filmmaker Zia Anger.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2186 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#).

Your music feels synonymous with the visuals and the performative moments that go along with it. Are the concepts for the visuals a part of your thinking while you're writing songs?

I think it's changed a lot. More than anything, it always evolves. My most recent album, *Blood Bitch*, is the first album I've been able to make while also thinking about that stuff as part of the making of it. That doesn't mean that I know what's going to happen on stage with that material because I'm not so interested in that. That's more interesting when it actually happens. I'm more interested in bringing in my experience of the performances into the compositional process. It was very important to me when I started making music (and one of the only reasons I could do it in the first place) that I could work with and create these very specific voices. I wanted to create a voice that was like: "I'm running through the room. Someone is chasing me and I don't know what to do." I wanted it to be this strange answering machine type of voice.

The visual side has never been a strong point for me. I'm only now starting to realize that some visual ideas I have can only be drawn out of me if I'm collaborating with someone. I'm surprising myself with actually having a visual world at all. I didn't used to think about this stuff when I wrote, but I was constantly thinking of voices and characters and intentions.



Has your way of making songs changed dramatically over the years?

I don't think so. I'm not sure my music is that different now than it was when I started. When I was making my demos for *Blood Bitch*, people who were close to me and have known my music for a long time said that it reminded them, more than anything else I've done, of my very first album. These are people who know me very well and might've heard all the demos I've been making for 10 or 15 years. I think that what I release now is more similar to what I've always been working on. Whereas my first three albums were probably taken further by being recorded in a studio, at least some of those albums, and were sort of put into a more conventional context of what an "album" is.

To me, *Blood Bitch* is closer to the way my brain works than what I did 10 years ago, at least in album format. I've done so many other things, too, and collaborations. I think that all the things that come with the album in terms of visuals and how things are put onto the stage and things like that, that also comes with experience. Whereas music just kind of started for me on its own. From the beginning, I was just writing music and words, but the rest of it evolved slowly... and I had to have a lot of collaborations and experience. I had to be able to think about it for a while and process it for many years in order to get to what I'm doing now.



When you were a kid, did you always know that this kind of creative life was what you wanted?

I was always writing and I guess I was always singing. I don't think I thought of it as composing, just improvising, maybe singing along with songs I loved. I was listening to a lot of music and I remember very distinctly—because I didn't know English—that I just invented what I thought the words meant. I guess you could do that, even as a native English speaker. You listen to a lot of music when you're a kid and you don't care about the words as much as when you listen to them as an adult. As an adult you realize what the songs are about, or the deeper meanings of phrases and words. I definitely had that experience to the max, because I didn't know a single word of English. I would constantly just invent what the songs were about. I don't really remember the details of that, but I do remember, there was a lot of composition and writing involved for me in listening to music as a kid.



You are known for being a collaborator, both musically and visually. I'm thinking of the work you've done with [Zia Anger](#) and [Susanna Wallumrød](#). What does the collaborative process mean to you?

I really can't overemphasize my need for collaboration and conversation and dialogue. Every collaboration is different, but the *Meshes of Voice* collaboration I did with Susanna was very important. It was quite early on for me, because it was actually created back in 2008 or 2009. I think I was very polite and I wouldn't have been that polite today. That record represents this very fragile, early moment of collaborating for me and is very special because of that. It's very magical. It's funny because I haven't really collaborated with that many musicians. I've chosen or been given the opportunity to collaborate with poets and people doing visual arts and I started collaborating with Zia. All those different collaborations have felt really life changing for me in different ways, from *Meshes* onwards.

I remember at some point, I thought, "Well, can I at least write one song that's not really just drawn out of a collaboration?" I just felt like I was taking so much energy from others into my songwriting. I know that's also me thinking, "Am I exploiting a project if I keep thinking about a subject or a way of composing music and I bring that into my own work from a collaboration? Is that then not mine? Am I not allowed to do that?" Conversation works. It's sort of boundless in that way and seamless. You can never just decide to stop thinking about something you're really interested in. I can't. Many times I've taken so much from my collaborators that I've written a bunch of my own new stuff because I couldn't stop thinking about the collaboration, so I just had to keep going with it on my own. I think that's what collaborations should do. They should bring forth something that you didn't see in yourself and something you can't stop thinking about, something that changes you, something that opens you up to something. I haven't really done much beyond my own work the last few years, so I've chosen to sort of focus on collaborating on the performances instead. It's shifted a bit into being part of my solo work, the collaboration, from being kind of different projects. That's been really interesting, too. The nature of what it is to collaborate.



The videos you've made with Zia feel like art pieces to me. Are you surprised that more artists don't take advantage or really thoughtfully explore making videos in this way?

I think many times, it's about how much you're willing to give in a collaboration, how much you're willing to let go of your own ideas, and how much you're willing to trust somebody. Of course, more than anything it's about finding people to work with that you can fully trust. From the very beginning of making videos with Zia Anger, I just felt like I could give her complete artistic freedom because it didn't feel right to do anything else. You have this great opportunity to let someone have a really strong vision about something that you started or something that your song contributed to, so why then set boundaries? I didn't quite understand the need to do that. Is it even a collaboration, I wonder, or just her films?

For Zia, it's also about how there are so many problematic aspects about making music videos. For one, it's like an art form that is often times not taken seriously enough, but these days it's also a super, super, super low budget type of work. If you're giving someone almost no money to make something and then you also want to control what they're doing on top of that, it's kind of crazy. Filmmakers need so much money because it's so expensive to make films. I find it so amazing that someone as fantastic as Zia wants to do this crazy stuff for so little, because it's such hard work to do that on such a budget. There are always practical considerations, too. That's another reason, I think, to just throw yourself into it and completely trust someone that really wants to do this crazy thing without being given hardly enough money to really even finish it, but they do it anyway.



It also must be a great thing for Zia though, having an artist whose work you connect with so completely that is also willing to let you run wild with their music and create whatever you want.

Yeah, hopefully! That's the sort of stuff that she tells me and I find it really amazing that my work can have that effect. Making a music video for someone is some of the best "listening" you can do, I think. It's such an interesting way, for me, to see someone's intense listening to my work. There's so much to learn from it. So thorough.

I read a quote from you in which you said *Blood Bitch* was both the most personal thing you've ever made and the most heavily fictional. I like the idea that those two things don't need to contradict each other—you can often say the most intimate things about yourself through the guise of a fictional character.

Blood Bitch is the album that sounds the most like my brain, at least that's how I feel about it right now. Who knows how I'll feel about my brain in two years. I do think it has to do with the process of making it, because it's not made in the studio and it's played almost entirely by me. I'm by no means a Prince or any kind of other artist that can play all instruments, so it's just made by sound bits that I find very sonically interesting and ways of playing that I could do myself that I was really looking for and trying to learn how to do. For me, there's a lot of emotional attachment to so many of the sounds on the album. It just had to feel right, all of it, every single sound.



I think that that research that was so important on *Blood Bitch*, so much so that it kind of leaked into the writing. I wouldn't say I was really researching, but I was definitely watching a lot of films and getting a lot of inspiration from that, particularly the way they sounded. I got very interested in watching bad horror narratives—very generic story narratives that appear in a lot of horror films. The ones I was watching were very low budget and probably not so interested in their own narratives. I'm guessing the filmmakers were super fascinated by other aspects of filmmaking, not just providing a good narrative. In the process of watching all of these movies I felt like I almost had to relearn how to watch movies. I ended up taking a lot of little words and scenes and dialogue from those films and then just writing around that. Because of that, I probably wasn't thinking much about myself, so I could re-enter the whole story lyrically and with my own voice without even thinking it was me. That's a good trick. You can sort of trick yourself into saying things about yourself you wouldn't have thought of otherwise.

Finding new ways to trick yourself whenever you are making things is always a good strategy. I think it's important. Also, it's not a goal for me to say things about myself on an album, but it is a goal for me to find some kind of potential through music to express myself very freely and to have a very liberal way with language. I think that's something you can hear. I trust my gut feeling with that. If something feels risky and emotional, then that's something I'll keep on doing because it feels valuable.

Essential Jenny Hval Videos:

[Conceptual Romance](#), from *Blood Bitch*. 2016, directed by Zia Anger.

[Female Vampire](#), from *Blood Bitch*. 2016, directed by Jenny Berger-Myhre.

[That Battle Is Over](#), from *Apocalypse, girl*. 2015, directed by Zia Anger.

[Take Care of Yourself](#), from *Apocalypse, girl*. 2015, directed by Miles Joris-Peyrafitte.

[Sabbath](#), from *Apocalypse, girl*. 2015, directed by Zia Anger.

[Innocence Is Kinky](#), from *Innocence is Kinky*. 2014, directed by Zia Anger.

Stills taken from Hval's video collaborations with Zia Anger

Name

Jenny Hval

Vocation

Musician, Artist

Fact

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