MGMT on following your instincts



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As told to Hannah Street Elliott, 2480 words.

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Do you think albums are getting more difficult to make or easier?

Andrew VanWyngarden: It's pretty much the same… It's never been that easy.

Ben Goldwasser: We've always had a pattern of where there would be a year of torturing ourselves and being like, "Oh, we're never going to make good music ever again." Then we have a breakthrough at some point; it feels really easy and just comes together. We usually need to give ourselves deadlines and cram at the end.

Andrew: I think considering we've been making music together and been friends since we were 18, it's great that we can still work on something for a year and a half and not kill each other. There is still a special, creative spark that happens. It's not completely dead.

Do you think that you're more confident in your production and writing skills now?

Ben: We are definitely more confident in our production skills. We've always made a lot of the sounds ourselves, but we weren't as good at recording things when we started out. Our producer, Dave Fridmann would give us a lot of shit when we'd go into the studio and be like, "How on earth did you make this sound so bad?" [*laughs*]

Andrew: Ben has gotten a lot better at organization.

Ben: At organization?

Andrew: Yeah. I think that we used to be more equal in the way I still am, where there'll be, like, 50 folders for one thing.

Ben: We never used to label anything.

Andrew: *Nothing* is labeled or dated.

Ben: It would make sense to us, but if we handed it to somebody else, there'd be 50 tracks that were just, "track one, track two." The drum tracks would be spread throughout the session. We've gotten a little better at that.

I think neither of us are *that* comfortable in a traditional professional studio environment. We have our own scrappy way of getting things done that works for us.

Andrew: Comfort is the biggest part of it. We've gone into studios with lots of amazing musicians and producers that we admire, look up to, inspire us or influence us, but a lot of times Ben and I won't be completely comfortable. It spirals into this situation where we're getting freaked out that we're not taking advantage of our studio time. With Dave and his studio, everything is exactly the same as it was the second we walked in in 2006. I mean *everything*… the same mugs in the kitchen, same sticky note on the microwave. We can get there and get right into the work, rather than spending time adapting to the environment.

How do you stay efficient and productive working with creative partners who are also close friends?

Andrew: It's nice bringing in one more person. For *Little Dark Age* we worked with Patrick Wimberly. He helped to push us and encourage us to finish ideas. When Ben and I get together sometimes, we end up just getting coffee and talking about how weird everything is, and then get down on ourselves. So it's good to have somebody else lift up the motivation.

What is your writing practice like? Do you write everyday?

Ben: We always get excited about making a new record right after we finish a record. Then we go out and tour, burn ourselves out on the road, and then we have to take a year to recuperate before we feel like we're ready to dive into the creative process again. It's kind of a bad cycle that we're still trying to find a way out of.

Andrew: Working with Ariel [Pink] and Patrick and seeing how both of them can take any idea, like a voice memo or something they were just humming on the street, and turn it into something… or at least finish it out as an idea, was something we picked up from working with them. I'm still doing voice memo song ideas and I don't think that's happened after the last album or couple of albums. Hopefully we keep those wheels spinning.

You two weren't physically in the same room making your last album… Ben was in Los Angeles and Andrew was in New York. How did you manage to collaborate and make an album without actually working in-person?

Andrew: Text. A lot of group text.

Ben: Patrick would text, "You have to send something to us right now. We're in the studio in New York and we're going crazy in here. You have to send us something."

I got really into automatic songwriting, where I would just play the first thing that came into my head really badly and record it, and just be like, "Alright, it's done," and send it to you guys. I'd be like, "Here, do something with this. It's a piece of garbage."

Andrew: That's how we wrote a bunch of the new songs. Which is great, because that's how we used to do stuff in college, too.

Ben: It's really fun. It's really liberating to not obsess over getting something exactly right and how it sounds, at least at the start, and then worry about that later.

I think it made us feel more creative in some ways because it wasn't a traditional work environment for us. We've always written records by just the two of us locking ourselves in a room and putting all this pressure on ourselves.

Does anxiety about how people will react to a new release affect how you approach making work?

Andrew: Making an album or just the creative process in general always goes all over the place. It can be really intense, and it opens up parts of your brain that bring with it scary thoughts or anxieties. I think this time we were able to, generally, not be cynical about things and be proud of what we're doing… or just be confident that what we're doing is who we are.

I don’t think, as a human being, I’ll ever be able to remove myself of that desire, unfortunately. I don’t think we were ever really focused on it, but maybe it was in our heads a lot more. Even coming off of the first album and making a second album, we would have to be superhuman not to have that influence our brains at that point.

Especially when we’ve always been into subverting people’s expectations or ideas of what we should be.

How would you define success, and how would you define failure in your creative career?

Andrew: I can say more easily how we would not define it, which would be in terms of financial success. I think that for me, success is getting as close to expressing yourself in a true way, with as few filters or things that tear that down, as possible.

Ben: Yeah. At the end of making all of our records, there’s been a moment where I’ve felt, “Oh yeah, this is the thing that should’ve come out of us right now.” Even if it’s not what we would do a year from then, in that moment, it is the closest we can possibly come to expressing ourselves.

Andrew: It’s weird being on a label, especially a major label, like we are. Because you make something, and then you have to completely redesign your brain to think of it in this different way. Like, “How are we going to market this and get the most exposure?” That doesn’t come very naturally to us. That can be not the easiest transition, thinking about what you just spent all this time on as a product.

How do you approach marketing a new project, especially having to work with many other people such as a label, etc, while also making sure it doesn’t feel inauthentic or forced?

Ben: We put a lot of energy in trying to make the right videos for songs and pair up with directors who we feel interpret the songs in a way that helps bring it across to people, or create a totally new experience out of it.

Andrew: We just generally try to follow our gut instincts as much as possible on decisions. I think that’s something that we’ve gotten better at and we’ve learned from not doing that in the past. We’ve tried a couple non-traditional approaches to label oriented stuff, and people have really liked it.

With our album listening that all bands have to do with their label when the album is finished… well, I don’t know if all bands have to do it where you’re in a corporate meeting room and teleconferencing with the “LA office” and all this stuff, but we decided to make it different by having fog machines and dry ice. And we hired masseuses to come and offered all of the employees in the meeting to get massages while they listened to our album. They were like, “This is the best album listening I’ve ever done.” [*Laughs*]

Ben: I think what we’ve realized late is that it’s kind of a novel idea to try to get people to just listen to music. It’s hard. It’s really hard to do.

You toured heavily for years before things slowed down a bit around 2014. What do you wish someone told you before you went into that multi-year period of intense touring?

Ben: I think, “This is not normal.” Which is actually what somebody told me when we were on our first tour with Of Montreal and this group Grand Buffet. They were asking me if I liked touring and I was like, “I don’t really think I do,” and he said, “It’s not for everybody. You don’t have to convince yourself that this is something you should be doing.”

What do you like about touring?

Andrew: I like certain hotel rooms. I really like getting room service and staying in the hotel. [*Laughs*] I just like making it really, really cold, and then getting french fries. Those kind of things.

Ben: That actually is a good point… the situations of being on tour, you can create an environment for yourself, or experiment with like, “I’m only going to eat hummus this week.” If you do that at home, then you’re just maybe crazy, but if you’re on tour, anything goes.

When you reflect on the earlier years of your career in 2007 or 2008, what do you realize in hindsight?

Andrew: I wasted a lot of energy at times getting really anxious about things that ultimately were inconsequential. You don’t have to lose hair because you’re late for something. We’re supposed to be “rock stars” that don’t care about time, but I can’t ever actually do that.

Ben: I don’t think I’m a very good rock star. I have a lot of room for improvement.

Andrew: Yeah. We’re supposed to be a rude, inconsiderate, and immature… I can only do one of those things at a time these days.

Ben: Men are terrible at multitasking.

A lot of your new songs grapple with using phones and social media… are you coming from a place of wishing you could completely detach? What is your relationship to social media?

Andrew: I’m scared to constantly be attached to my phone. It just makes me slightly mad at myself, I think, disgusted or something.

Ben: I quit smoking not too long ago, and I would think about how many minutes of every day I would spend smoking a cigarette, just to take a break, or punctuate something with a cigarette. Checking your phone is the same thing. Just filling up time with your own head is really scary, to the point where you start hallucinating or whatever, just because you’re not accustomed to giving yourself over to your own thoughts that much.

Andrew: I have to remind myself that you don’t always have to be doing something. It’s okay to just stare at the ground for awhile. That’s why I like to maintain regular psychedelic drug use, because when you’re on psychedelics, the last thing you want to do, at least for me and all my friends, is look at your phone or think about money. There’s something to that. I feel like there’s this sort of false connectivity that’s happening. It’s a total illusion, and sometimes you have to really break away from that. Just go lay in the pile of soil in the forest for awhile.

Andrew VanWyngarden recommends:

The movie *Mysterious Skin*… Joseph Gordon-Levitt is in it from 2004. It’s kind of a fucked up storyline about child abuse, but the score is by Harold Budd and Robin Guthrie, and then there’s a lot of Slowdive music.

A thing I do not recommend is that I hate that my cat shits and pees so much. I don’t know why so much poop comes out… I don’t feed her that much, and cat shit is just the most vile… it’s disgusting. I would add dog poop is not as bad as cat poop, I guess.

I’d recommend pumpkin pancakes. I hope it’s not too seasonal, but I think they would be good throughout the year.

Ben Goldwasser recommends:

I’ve been re-getting into eighties music, and there’s this group called New Musik, that I really like. It’s wacky eighties music, but not in like that annoying way where you start listening to some eighties and you’re like, “This is a little bit too eighties for me.” It’s just on the right side of that. Really well produced.

I would recommend LA. I hated it for a long time, and then learned to like it. I like that you can have your own experience there. What I like about New York and what I don’t like about it is that you don’t really have a choice about the experience that you have as soon as you leave the house… there’s all this stuff being thrown at you constantly, which is also great, but I don’t know. I would recommend if you ever go to LA, go to the Huntington Garden or Huntington Library… Really amazing botanical garden, but tons of desert plants. I’m really into cacti. It’s super cool place to get lost in.

The show *You’re the Worst*… I guess it’s not a sitcom but it’s sort of set up like that, where it’s some friends who have this weird living situation together, but they all have various

emotional or mental illnesses. It’s very realistic, and they live in LA, which is interesting for me. It’s really hilarious and really depressing at the same time.

Name
Andrew VanWyngarden and Ben Goldwasser

Vocation
Musicians

