

On focusing your approach



An interview with musician Amen Dunes

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As told to Gary Canino, 1296 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

Four years went by between your last record and your latest. Did you feel any unease about wanting to get it out sooner?

Yes, but I'm all about waiting. While I'm making something, I'm never in a rush. Back in the day, I would rush because I wasn't thinking of it for anybody but myself.

Now you feel as if you're making it for other people?

Yeah, very consciously. I wanted to make this for as many people as possible. I don't want it to be exclusive or niche in any way. I just want to make music that makes people feel good. That was honestly my intention.

Whereas before your music was more niche?

Yeah, I used to make music for myself, or to make myself feel good. Then *Love*, the last record, was the beginning of being like, "Let's be more outward." That music was intentionally so, and also not outward enough.

In a recent interview, you spoke of writing songs as being in this "vacant mind" state. That's a common theme I've seen with other songwriters.

Totally. I've always worked that way, and then I see other people say the same thing. Hank Williams spoke of picking preexisting songs out of the air. That's kind of what it's like for me. The mustard seed or the germ of the song is pre-existing. The song and melody already exist. All the polishing and the painting and chiseling and shit afterward is conscious work that happens over time. But the song, melody, and structure all just comes out within 30 to 50 minutes. If I'm ever sitting for more than an hour writing a song, it's not going to be good.

Have you ever tried setting pre-existing lyrics to a song?

I think that's a little gross, or maybe it's just not my style. My brother is an amazing songwriter, and he can do that. He'll write these lyrics that are insane, and then put music to them. Not many people can do that. Maybe Leonard Cohen could, too.

Leonard Cohen would always write three times as many verses as he needed, and sort of pick the ones that fit the best.

I did that with the song "Believe." I had maybe 10, 15 different verses. Over time I would choose the best ones. Leonard said "Hallelujah" took five years or so to write. "Believe" is kind of my version of that. It took me about a year of all these iterations and rewrites. Normally, it's not like that.

How do you pick the verses you want to use?

You just use your gut. What is going to impact people the most? I watched this movie called *The Thin Man* last night, which was based on a [Dashiel Hammett](#) novel. Any popular art that is really good is super chiseled like that. There's no dead space. They're very conscious. They just get it. I was trying to do that with the lyrics, just picking which lyric hits the right way.

It's an interesting time to be creating music that's as accessible as possible for people, especially in an age where it feels like indie labels are almost an equivalent to major labels.

I definitely want to clarify that in terms of making this for other people, I don't want to be a pop star, or an Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter star. I don't mean that at all. Because people can lose their old way of making music for that. What I mean is I want to create good, popular music, in the vein of all the big ones. Michael Jackson. Bob Marley. The Beatles. Tom Petty. Marvin Gaye. Those are the people that I became obsessed with in the last couple of years. I've always listened to them. My favorite music has always been those artists, but they really just rose in my consciousness. Their power and energy is what I'm looking to channel.

It seems as if the times have pushed smaller bands into two extremes, either adhering to some sort of mainstream sound or an attempt at being so "weird" that you become noticed.

And it's fucking impossible to be weird right now. Because part of being weird is being unknown and undiscovered. It's kind of idiosyncratic. If everything is available all the time to anyone, nothing is idiosyncratic, because everybody is aware of everything. Everything becomes normalized and reduced and kind of commodified and appropriated. That's why it's scary. I don't think you should try and be weird. It doesn't mean anything, but originality does, and there's still originality. Maybe it's a blessing that it's not easy to be weird.

Your albums and songs have these kind of "big" concepts, *Love* and *Freedom*. Was the idea behind this to be vague enough that the audience could attach their own meaning to it?

There are two sides to it. There's the extraterrestrial reasoning, which is that [naming them this way] was completely sincere and reflects my personal intention. They're big enough concepts that they're impersonal. Then there's the kind of superficial, or terrestrial side: I called them *Freedom* and *Love* because it was funny. It's kind of a dick thing to call your album *Love*, in a way. I thought that was the most punk title I could give it. It's not ironic, though—it's more playful or irreverent, just having fun without consciously aggravating. *Freedom* is funny, too.

It's rock and roll music. It's not fucking literature. It's not film. It's a band. There's some tradition there of irreverence, or it wouldn't be in the lineage. That's kind of what I'm getting at. Six months ago, I discovered Buddy Holly for the first time in my life, and he's irreverent. He was this modern Elvis, but for the teens. He was only two or three years after Elvis, but if you listen to Elvis next to Buddy Holly, he seems a little conservative and old-fashioned. Buddy Holly is this kind of trashy, loose, sexy but covered up kind of guy. Anyway, that's that kind of irreverence that's been going on forever. It's subconscious, but I was taught by those people not to be too on the nose.

You've mentioned that this record examines the "masculine identity." Although the album was recorded before the cultural reevaluation of masculine identity we're now witnessing, it still seems timely.

It wasn't conscious. I believe that all the stuff I do just comes to me from somewhere else. I just follow the scent a little bit. These songs just started coming up. I have my own kind of spiritual practice, and self-inquiry is a big part of my life. You inevitably are led back to your family. I was doing a lot of stuff with my father. I was very conscious of him, so he came out in the songs and so did my mother. Then I thought, "Well, I'm a fucking Irish Jew. My family is from Philly. I grew up in New York." They were Holocaust survivors, so all that started coming out. I started thinking about my past, and the kids I grew up with. They were these young, masculine troubled identities. Then "[Miki Dora](#)" just fit in with that. It just manifested itself, but it's only a reflection of my own process. It's not meant to be a suggestion or projecting on anybody—it's just my insides turned out. It just happens to

coincide with what's going on.

Amen Dunes recommends:

[Ramona Maharshi](#)

[Antonin Artaud](#)

[John's Pizza on Blecker](#)

[Underworld](#)

[Jane Campion](#)

Name

Amen Dunes

Vocation

Musician



Photo: Michael Schmelling