

On feeling productive without feeling rushed



Musician and producer Jack Latham (aka Jam City) on creating worlds with your work, addressing the personal and the political in art, why collaboration is useful, and trying to find a place for self-care.

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As told to Max Mertens, 1925 words.

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You wrote *Pillowland* while you were living in California. How did that physical environment shape the music?

My whole life I've had an obsession with America and American culture. I think it's always loomed large on the horizon to many people—especially in the UK and Europe—as this cultural juggernaut. I lived there for a year and that's kind of how I got started working a little bit more with other people in music, writing and producing. It was definitely a surreal experience in terms of finally getting to experience this sort of mythical place, especially California is so bizarre. It's a very lonely place at times, it's a very dazzling and intoxicating place as well. That's how the writing started, processing these weird, mixed feelings of isolation and intoxication and excitement. And that's kind of the seed of the record I think, being over there and experiencing that way of life, especially as an outsider.

You've always engaged with different sociopolitical issues in your work, but you've described this record as more personal. What events informed that shift in your thinking or writing?

The last record that I put out was before Brexit, before Trump got elected. It's crazy to be talking about this now that he's no longer president—I didn't anticipate that, in a way. After those two things happened, I tried to address that in my writing, but I just ended up writing some really, really bad music. It was just kind of rage-filled and angry at the people in power in the UK, and angry at the situation in America, and rightfully so, but it just felt impotent. I kind of had to ask myself "Who is this really for?" It's not making me feel better about the situation, I don't think it's really offering much relief in the face of this very gloomy, sociopolitical situation that we find ourselves in. Not to say that meant I just wanted to turn inward, but I started thinking about things a little bit differently, and I started to cut myself a little bit of slack in terms of being like "You don't have to write a political album, you don't have to write in a polemical way" like the last one was.

I think I started thinking a little more about my life and people's lives as well, the kind of dreams and desires of people that motivate them on a level that's buried under the surface of politics. A desire for a better life or a life lived with purpose and meaning and excitement. Those aren't necessarily political concerns, but I feel like they motivate political decisions in terms of who people vote for, in a way.

What's the first album that you heard growing up and remember thinking "I want to live inside this world"?

Two records first come to mind. When I was 12, my sister bought a copy of [Red Hot Chili Peppers'] *Californication*, I still love that record, I love that band. It sounds cliché, growing up in very boring, rainy

town England, imagining what life would be like being in a rock band in California. I remember coming home from school, putting that album in my headphones on repeat, and completely drifting away. I think it was the same for my dad's generation with the Eagles or Crosby, Stills & Nash or whatever. Generation to generation, this kind of continued obsession with that kind of California culture—it's never going to die. The other one was probably *Purple Rain*. That movie as well, you feel the desperation, the pain that Prince goes through, and at the same time it's this beautiful, slightly psychedelic, but also cold, wintry world of Minneapolis. It's just perfect. I think maybe a year after Chili Peppers, I started really getting into Prince and *Purple Rain*, that was definitely a world that I wanted to live in when I was younger for sure.

You've worked with artists including Kelela, Troy Sivan, and Lil Yachty. How do you approach these collaborations?

I just approach it in the same way I do anything really, which is to make something sound good. I definitely have my ideas, but I'm not going to walk into the studio and force you, Phil Spector-style, to go along with my vision. I like being in a situation where I'm in uncharted territory myself as a musician; it's a little bit more exciting for me to enter new worlds, to enter other people's worlds, rather than being like "Okay I'm going to force you into my little Jam City pop mode."

I'm inspired enough by stuff in the charts and pop music anyway that I don't really feel the need to come in with this big master plan to shake things up. A lot of the time it's getting in touch with the artist and being like "What are your influences? No matter how embarrassing, share me some songs that you love, maybe that's a sign point or something like that." I'm always going to leave my mark on anywhere, you know—I can't help that, there's always going to be my little signature and tricks that's going to happen. It's nice to push that in another direction when I'm with someone else.

In the past, you've shared a bunch of remixes and edits on Twitter as free downloads. When you're between projects, do you feel like it's sometimes necessary to purge leftover material from a certain time frame before moving onto the next thing?

Yeah. It's a weight around your neck after awhile, especially the stuff that leaked or people genuinely like it, and you're just like "I'm not serving anyone by keeping these to myself." I'm not going to lie to you, some of the music that I've given away for free obviously isn't my favorite things that I've ever done, otherwise I'd be releasing it in a bit more of a serious way. There's like thousands of tracks and hours of music at this point on my hard drive, if people really want this, I'm not doing anything with it. Once every two years or three years, it's time to let this go. I know a lot of other musicians who feel like that, too, especially people in pop music. It's agonizing for a lot of these artists who write incredible, incredible material, but the label machine does not allow you to put it up for free on WeTransfer or whatever, tweet a link out to people, and just leak it. I'm lucky in that I'm in that position where if I want to share something with people out there, I can. There's always going to be more of it so you shouldn't get too hung up on it.

Obviously artists have lost a major revenue stream this year not being able to tour and play shows, how have you adjusted to that financial reality?

For the last couple of years, I haven't really been a touring artist, so my revenue streams have been more from production and songwriting. In a way, I'm definitely, inexplicably one of the luckier ones. I've got friends who were touring 300 days out of the year that are in very scary positions right now. It's heartbreaking, really. It's really, really heartbreaking. I think one of the saddest things this year for me personally is that I'll be working on something for myself or other people, and I've definitely fallen foul of a dark cloud coming over me, like "What's the point of any of this?" I can't see a world in which this piece of work enters the world in the way that it's supposed to pre-pandemic. That's been the hardest thing this year, having an almost existential sense of what you're doing, what you're contributing to your artform.

I'm in a better place now, mentally, but that's been one of the things that I've struggled with this year. Before this, whatever I was working on, whether it was for myself or other people, I would have an understanding about what the next steps were in terms of releasing it and shows and organizing tours, or even thinking about some

sort of real-life application for music. Without that this year, it's been often quite disorienting, even if by large my workflow has been more or less the same in terms of what I've been working on. It's been a struggle imagining a world beyond our current situation for the music to go out into.

What do you do for self-care?

I'm really bad at it. I don't really take good care of myself to be honest. I have a very loving, supportive partner, she absolutely takes care of me, I can't really put it any other way. For me, work has always been my self-care, which works, but it's also very dangerous. I love making music. I love all facets of making music and playing music and collecting music and learning music and studying music. It gives me so much joy and sustenance in my life, but it's not self-care. It can make me feel good; it's definitely seen me through some harder times mentally, but it's not self-care.

It's definitely the time to slow down a little bit and try to reconnect to my immediate world. I really like reading, I'm a big reader, I really love history. I think the time it takes to concentrate on reading feels good for my brain, that and taking walks I suppose, and trying to eat well, trying to exercise as much as I can. I definitely let it slide a lot of the time or use work as an excuse. Holiday season is the time to get back on track.

In the age of streaming, there's a lot of pressure to be constantly putting out music, how do you avoid that mindset and operate under your own schedule?

I know I took a lot of time between these last two records, fundamentally, all that shit about the fucking Spotify CEO telling you to release a new song every week or whatever is ridiculous and toxic. Ironically for me, I would really like to release music more regularly, and I think that's something I could potentially do. I'm getting better at balancing working with other people and working on my own music, so I'm actually trying to look at next year as an opportunity to take advantage of that, find a way to be on a good schedule in terms of releasing music. There's definitely things more or less ready to go, I just have to make sure I don't get cold feet at the last minute, and decide that I need a different mix so I need to spend another few months tweaking a snare or whatever. Having said that, shit takes time and you can't rush, and you can really tell when someone's rushed a record. I never want to do that. I like to stay regular but also quality control comes first, that's the most important thing.

Jam City Recommends:

Donna De Salvo and Jessica Beck - [Andy Warhol-From A to B and Back Again](#)

Rob Young - [Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music](#)

Eric D. Weitz - [Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy](#)

[Samuel R. Delany - Times Square Red, Times Square Blue](#)

John Rechy - [Bodies and Souls](#)

Name

Jack Latham

Vocation

Musician and producer

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