

On making something unexpected

Musician Devon Welsh discusses not taking yourself too seriously, reading the reviews, and why making art is time well spent.

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As told to Joseph Grantham, 2983 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Mental health](#).

Do you think it matters to be able to talk about your work in an articulate way?

Uhh... [laughs]

Or do you think it's fine to make your art and if you're doing an interview or if a fan comes up to you with questions, do you think it's okay to just say "I don't really know" when they ask you about your songs?

I feel like that's probably okay to do. That's what I hope, anyway, because that's how I feel about explaining my music. I could spin up a bunch of stuff to say if someone wanted me to talk about it but it's ultimately not very relevant. I find artist's statements about things to be kind of silly in general. Or that they're often humorous, unintentionally. When people have some kind of ready-made thesis statement about their music or about their artwork, it's not necessarily very helpful for relating to the music or to the art. It's kind of like you're trying to sell cars or something. You're trying to do an elevator pitch as if you could meet Bill Gates and be able to explain in thirty seconds or less why he should start a foundation in your name.

Some people are good at that and it kind of freaks me out. Can you tell me more about the cover art for the new album? It's much different than your other album covers.

I guess I had this attitude about music that I wanted to just have fun with it rather than continue to refine and optimize my brand and continue down this road of having handwritten cursive covers. I like those covers but I wanted to do something unexpected. I sort of didn't give a shit anymore, in the sense that I was not concerned about upsetting somebody or destroying my career, so I figured that making a cover that was unexpected and silly would be fun for me. And maybe for people that like my music, they would be taken aback but that would be productive in some way for them. They could listen to the music with a fresh perspective. [Laura Callier](#), who did [the cover](#), and I had been talking about these bootleg action movie posters that are illustrated. You'll see a *Die Hard* action movie poster for the Ghanaian market and it's this hand-illustrated thing with a muscly Bruce Willis and bad-looking explosions and there's something really interesting and funny about them. I think it's good because on its face it's very silly and funny and it catches your eye, I would hope. But then the album invites the listener to see the sincere aspects of it as well.

I think the cover does exactly what you're saying. It helps you get in the right frame of mind when you sit down to listen to the album. But then the silliness is kind of subverted.

I like when things are more sincere than you think they are at first glance. Rather than the other way around. To capture sincerity, to guide the listener in a proper way, it's a tricky thing to do because there's an aesthetic of sincerity that exists and that has been developed over the years.

When I first started releasing music with Majical Cloudz, the first album cover was just the text and it was painted. And that was an attempt at subverting the expectations of an album cover as I saw it at the time, in my world, and to present something that felt more sincere. When you looked at the cover you'd feel like "Oh this is raw, I'm having access to something that is not polished." But over time that aesthetic became codified in a way. Doing the muscle man illustration album cover is something that AI wouldn't do necessarily, that a boutique branding firm wouldn't come up with. And so in doing so, it communicates my humanity, to some extent. The listener can see it and be like, 'He has a sense of humor. That's a funny image.' But also, it's a human image, it's not a graphic design thing. I think that was important for me as well.

I feel like with Majical Cloudz, the idea of sincerity was something that got kind of attached to that project. I don't know if you felt that way. Your shows were so intimate, and seemed to be about genuinely forming a connection with the audience, but did that make you feel uncomfortable, having that become almost branded on you?

There's always going to be a boiled down version of what your thing is, of what they describe it to be. And I felt that that was as good as any because I felt like it did capture my intent behind making the music. I was able to do that for a few years and then I think it contributed to me burning out in a big way because it's a tough thing to do, emotionally or mentally. When I was young I didn't really have any boundaries in my life and I had a lot of energy to give to the music but it's not a very sustainable expenditure of energy. Which is fine. I'm happy with what it was. It was a tough thing to sustain, like other types of music tend to be too. Bands that give a lot of energy and are very sincere tend to not last very long because you just run out of gas doing that sort of thing.

Was the song "Twenty Seven" a response to all of that? Did you ever want what the narrator of that song wants, your "face on all the magazines," things like that?

Did I ever want that?

Yeah.

Oh yeah, of course. It's all autobiographical. [laughs]

I like that song a lot. It's really honest. What's the "miracle" you're referencing in that song when you say "hallelujah for the miracle"?

The miracle of life, of existing in this one way train of life. Where you just grow through time. The miracle of change and time. I was all of these different people. My very identity is this ever-changing thing and I'm constantly learning and in awe of life and over time it keeps on developing but no matter where you are at the time, like in the song, "Oh, when I turn twenty-seven then I'll have it all figured out," but of course you never do.

How do you feel about wasting time? I had a bad start to the day yesterday because I didn't know how I was going to fill my day. It's so easy to waste hours on your phone, looking at Instagram reels and trailers for TV shows. And then you see other people online "not" wasting time, being productive.

It's easy to think that other people are doing more than you are, artistically, or that they're somehow wasting less time. Yeah, I worry about wasting time but then I enjoy wasting time. I sometimes wonder about how to think about wasting time. What is valuable time spent in the context of a short life?

I've been having these heart issues over the last few weeks that I've been going to the doctor about repeatedly, so I'm like, I could just die of a heart attack next month, and what does it mean to use your time wisely vs. to have wasted your time? Making art is time well spent in the sense that it's something that can reach out and touch people and that people can relate to even after you're gone. Ultimately, I think that that's the crux of life, it's love.

It sounds like a corny thing to say but when you really get down to it, and you're in these situations that put you into this mindset where you suddenly don't care about all these things you used to care about in your life, but you care about other people, and you care about love, you care about being loved by people, you care about showing people that you love them, and connecting with them. With art, you can do that with people and you don't even know it. Connecting with people even when you're not around to see it, that's a good thing.

Do you read reviews of your work?

Yeah, I'll read reviews. It'll be rare to read a review and feel like "Okay, this person really did it justice and there are things that they said that are critical that I actually agree with, like oh this is good work." Oftentimes it'll be like, they listened to the album a couple times and then they wrote something.

I'm looking now at a review of one of your albums, the little one-sentence synopsis of the album. It says the album sets your voice free to "preen, wander, and soar."

To *preen, wander, and soar*. Fuck off! Shut the fuck up. [laughs] In that review, I still remember, it was like, "Devon sings as the strings crescendo and then he hits a fucking bum note," or something like that. "He hits a flat note." And then I listened to the song, and that *didn't happen*.

I think it's a dangerous part of the whole reviewing/criticism game. It's not just someone sitting down to write the most accurate, thorough critique of a work of art. It also becomes about the critic and they want (or need) to make it interesting for themselves. They need the review to be its own work of art.

Yeah, for my metaphor to work, the strings need to soar and he needs to belt out a bum note. That's my metaphor for this album. Cool, but that didn't happen so...what are you doing? With [*Dream Songs*] in particular, it took me so long to make that and it was a matter of life and death for me. I was so shattered as I was making that music. I was making these demos and I didn't know what I was doing because I had ended Majical Cloudz and I was so lost, so unconfident, I felt horrible, and I felt incapable of pulling myself out of this place where I was so depressed and I was so hopeless, and I had sent Austin [Tufts] some of my music and he was like "This is awesome, man, if you want any help with working on it..." And so I ended up making [*Dream Songs*] with him because I couldn't have done it on my own.

It was such a troubled time in my life. It took so much effort, and so much energy. It was so risky for me, it was so scary to put out that album, and then this [reviewer] gets the record and they sit down at their desk in One World Trade Center and they just piss out this review and they say that I hit a fucking bum note, and it's like "Okay, I'm putting the fucking gun in my mouth, you piece of shit." [laughs]

It reminds me of when I was in college writing papers for literature classes. Like, what useful thing am I going to say about this work of art? It can all feel a little bit forced. What frustrates you most about the music industry?

It's this industry that's premised on intimate expression through music, which is one of the most moving, intimate mediums of art. It's not intellectual, it goes straight to your soul. It's also a medium that appeals to young people. Music meant the most to me when I was coming of age, figuring out who I was. Music meant everything, it helped me process my life and my emotions. I see it as a sacred thing. It's a spiritual practice. It connects to people in their soul and in their heart. But then, you need to sell it. Not only do you need to sell it, but there are people who need to get fucking rich off this shit. They need to squeeze out every penny. I think that that's not a good combination.

You recently got a job as a journalist for a small local newspaper. Tell me about that. Has it been creatively fulfilling?

It's been really good because it's an excuse to write very regularly and I hadn't really had that before. Even if it's not creative writing, it's still writing, and it developed my confidence and brought me out of a time in my

life when I was confused as to what to do with myself. I wanted something other than music to put my attention on, something where somebody was telling me what to do and I could learn something that I had never done before. It's nice to have a different focus so that when I do think about music, it's fresh and I'm not obsessing over it and it's not the source of all these anxieties, and my identity isn't premised on music stuff.

Is being in a relationship with another musician a positive thing for you?

I've never been in a relationship with somebody who isn't also an artist, or a musician, or a writer. So I have no idea what the alternative is like. Being in a relationship with my fiancé Nika is good. It's inspiring. It can be a lonely thing to make art. It's easy to lose confidence in yourself and to feel like, "What the fuck am I doing?" So it's nice to be in a relationship with somebody who understands that and also does it. There's a sense of solidarity and a sense of understanding something that's so important to who you are. If you're a writer or a musician and your partner doesn't understand that part of you, that's huge. That's a big problem. And it's nice to be encouraged by seeing your partner make something and being like, "Oh, this is awesome, I want to make something too." I want to make something that will impress my partner who isn't so easy to impress, she's not somebody who knows nothing about music and is like "Oh you made a song! good for you!" She's somebody whose taste I respect and if I can make something that she likes then that's really good.

Has Nika ever called you out and said you need to go deeper into a song, or that a song feels half baked?

Oh yeah, for sure [laughs]. She'll always be supportive but it'll be like, "I don't know about this..." That's when I need to trust my gut because sometimes it'll be something that I don't like either. But sometimes it'll be something that I love and she'll be like "I don't get this," and I'll be like, "Well, you're dead wrong, so..."

When you're making an album, how much are you thinking about what it'll be like if you decide to perform it live?

It depends on the time in my life. When I really had that muscle strengthened and I was doing it a lot, it was one of the most fulfilling things I've ever done in my life. But it's a practice. You can get out of practice with it. You can be in a certain time in a life when it makes sense to do that. You can do that. I didn't really have a life outside of that. I lived in a little windowless bedroom in an apartment. So my bedroom sucked. I didn't want to spend time there, I didn't want to spend time at home. But being out and performing and being on tour and playing, that's where I lived. That's where I was alive. Now I have more going on in my life that isn't music. It's something that comes and goes. As of right now it's not really part of my thought process when I'm writing music.

Do you have any shows booked for the near future?

It sounds so lame to say but if I'm being totally honest, I struggle enough with my mental health and ability to live a life as it is.

That's not lame.

In the last year I pulled myself out from being a blob to being somebody that is doing things and is a productive citizen. I've come off of medication for depression. I built this routine and life for myself, and the album's coming out, and it's the first time I've released music in years. So then I was thinking about booking shows that were gonna follow right after the album. And then I was just like, you know what? It's the middle of the winter and I don't need to do that and it's not gonna be healthy for me to do that. So I decided not to do it. If somehow I blew up overnight on Tiktok and I became a meme with the kids, then I could go on tour but in the absence of that I probably won't because it's such a difficult thing to do. It would be me driving a rental sedan around America on the verge of tears trying to drive on the highway. It would be a danger because my eyes would be filling up with tears and I would not be able to see the cars in front of me. It wouldn't be a good thing to do.

Devon Welsh Recommends:

The LA Quartet by James Ellroy

Carbon Ideologies by William T. Vollmann

Rick Perlstein's four books on the post-1960 American conservative movement (*Before the Storm*, *Nixonland*, *The Invisible Bridge*, *Reaganland*)

A Wilderness of Error by Errol Morris

Hinterland by Phil A. Neel

Name

Devon Welsh

Vocation

musician

□

Nika Roza Danilova