

On maximizing your limitations



Musician Lee Buford (The Body, Sightless Pit) discusses embracing confrontation, doing whatever inspires you, the things he's learned from punk, and the beauty of making things with your friends.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2552 words.

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

First off, how are you coping with pandemic lockdown and the enforced downtime?

We were on tour with [Uniform](#) when it hit, and every day it was getting worse. Everybody was like, "Okay, we gotta go home. This is bad." It was definitely surreal driving home because we were in Atlanta when we canceled the tour, so we had to drive all the way back to Portland. It was bizarre—you couldn't go in places. I remember going to a Cracker Barrel someplace and they were closing up as we were in there. We were like, "Wow, this is the last time we get to eat in a restaurant." So it was brutal to make a drive that long and just be in the van the whole time. We'd go through the drive-thru at McDonald's and eat in the parking lot, which was grim.

When we got back and everyone was on the same page, I felt like it was okay. It was communal, like, "All right—everyone's in this together." I found some solace in that: I can't do anything; no one else can do anything. It's like a snow day when you were a kid, you know? And then over time, people started going out more and doing things, which seemed weird. I didn't know how to navigate that part of it, so I've just been staying at home and taking it very easy. Luckily, I live in a place with a backyard, so it doesn't really bother me too much. It's just weird because it's out of our hands. If we couldn't tour for some other reason, I would maybe be more upset. But I think you just have to let it go. If anything, hopefully this teaches people some level of patience.

Have you been making use of your time creatively?

Yeah, definitely. I have a print shop in a shed in my backyard, so I've just been making Body shirts. Every month or so, I'll make a new design. Just printing shirts and stuff for the band, it keeps me busy enough. Luckily, me and Chip live very frugally, so it pays most of our bills. So it's working out for us in that regard, and I'm just keeping active with that.

You live in Portland, which was one of the epicenters of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matters protests over the summer. The Body covered Body Count's "Cop Killer" and MDC's "Dead Cops" 15 years ago. Obviously, the feeling behind those protest songs has stood the test of time. But was there a specific event that you were reacting to when you recorded those songs? And how does that feeling translate to now?

Chip and I definitely grew up in punk backgrounds. And we also grew up in the South, where being a punk in late '80s and early '90s was a lot tougher. After Green Day, I think it got a lot easier—but pre-Green Day, we had a rough go of it. At the time we did those covers, we were living in Providence. I think maybe what sparked it was there was a guy who got arrested and was getting questioned in the Providence Police Station, and he grabbed a gun from one of the cops and shot one of the cops and then jumped out the window and actually ran to AS220, where most of the shows in Providence were. And that's where they caught him. And then they took him back and beat the shit out of him. He went to court with one of those Hannibal Lecter masks on because he was bleeding everywhere.

It was just insane to see such a blatant disregard for... Granted, he did shoot a cop. But you're not supposed to take a gun in to question someone. That's like the first rule of interrogation. So just seeing the court case and seeing them bringing him to court visibly bleeding, it was just so fucked up. New England definitely does not have a good history of race relations and/or the police being anywhere near okay. So I think that's probably what sparked it, but our disdain for any law enforcement has always been there.

In addition to *The Body*, you're involved in a few other musical projects. Do you have an overall artistic philosophy that you apply to all of them?

Well, I have an interest in a lot of things, and I think that's what keeps me going. If I just did the same thing it would be boring. Even with me and Chip, we try to do something different or try to push it in a different way on every record. Otherwise, doing it for as long as we have, I think we would just be so bored of it. If we didn't try new things, I think we would definitely stop. But as far as personally, I think it's more about knowing what I can do and just trying to maximize that. I'm not a crazy musician. I'm really not that good. But I know the things I'm *kind of* good at, and that's what I focus on. So I just take every project and figure out what I'm trying to do and what we're trying to do, and use what little skills I have and just try to get the most out of that.

What were your initial motivations when you and Chip started *The Body*?

I think it was more confrontational when we first started. I think we had a disdain for a lot of the music that was being played, so we were kind of anti-music. And I think for the first five years, there was no real audience for us. I think it took a while for people to get into it. It took a while for us to make it listenable in that regard but still hold true to the same vibe of just trying to make something that wasn't derivative of anything else.

Why did the confrontational aspect appeal to you?

I think a lot of it was just the way we grew up. Everything you did back then was confrontational. If you were a skateboarder, you got chased by cops and fucking prep kids who wanted to beat your ass. So I think over time you get into that mindset of, "All right. It's me and you against everyone else." And I think when you're in the punk scene, and you see things happening that are not really how you would do things and don't really vibe with you, I think it hits on an even more personal level of being like, "Now it really is just me and you." Because this thing that we are part of is not really what we're about. So I think that definitely is a part of it.

Experimentation is also a big part of what *The Body* does. You mentioned that trying new things prevents boredom, but are there any other reasons why it's important for you?

If someone's done something already that's great, we're not going to reinvent the wheel in that regard. So it's a matter of trying to do something new. And also, I think a lot of it is our love of so many different things and trying to consolidate them into one finished product. It's hard for us to be like, "Okay—we're a metal band. This is what we do." We like all these different things, so why can't we do all of this stuff in the same band? Which has probably worked to our detriment in a lot of ways because I think a lot of people are like, "Well, I wish they sounded like this record or that record." But, hey, what are you going to do?

On your more recent albums, you've started using the studio as a part of your songwriting process—as opposed to using it just to document your songs. How did that concept develop for you?

I really love the Beach Boys and Brian Wilson and stuff like that. Hearing those records and seeing what could be made opened a door up for me when I was in my late teens. I started recording probably when I was 16 or 17. It was nice to realize that you could do other stuff in the studio beyond, "You play guitar and I play drums and you play bass." I guess I just took that as far as I could take it. "Oh, let's get this choir on here," and stuff like that. Thinking about it like that also helped me out a lot, because it doesn't really put any limitations on anything—which I think is maybe the key to whatever success we may have.

Many bands try not to add too much extra production in the studio because they're very conscious of what can be reproduced live. They don't want to create a disappointing experience for their live audience in that respect. How did you get beyond that idea?

I think it's about taking the ego part out of it. A song or a record doesn't have to exist just one way. If we make a record, however the song ends up, that's how it ends up. If I'm not on the song, it doesn't matter. If Chip's not on a song, it doesn't matter. And then live is a different thing. It's thinking about things in a more fluid way, like, this is what we were doing at this time. This is the record we made. When we play live, maybe there's some variation of that song or whatever that is, but it's going to be a totally different thing.

Sometimes it is tough to not be able to reproduce certain songs a certain way, like, "Wow-I wish we could do this, but we can't." But I think it's something you have to accept and try to balance as best you can, like, "Okay-we can play these songs, but we can't play these songs." You just try to adapt in that way.

The press release for The Body's latest album, *I've Seen All I Need To See*, refers to the band as "sound liberators." What does that term mean to you?

I think it just means that we're not bound by one genre or one particular sound. I think every time we go in to record we're like, "How can we make this different?" Or, "How can we maximize whatever we're doing to the nth degree?" If someone's singing, let's get 20 people singing. If it's got a crazy drum part, let's get 10 people playing drums. You know what I mean? We try to push everything as far as we can, just to see what happens. And because I think it sounds good.

You and Chip regularly collaborate with other musicians. What do you see as the pros and cons of that process?

I don't see too many cons, but the pros are that I think it opened up a lot of stuff for us and the way we think about music. Like, I can't play cello-nor do I really want to learn how to play. But that shouldn't limit us from having it on our record, you know? When it's just me and Chip, it's a very distinct thing. So it's nice to offset something like Chip's screaming with some choir singing or our friend Chrissy [Wolpert] singing. It's all about creating a duality of extremes. Chip is extreme one way, and then Chrissy is extreme another way, just to make it interesting.

The Body started out in Little Rock, Arkansas, then moved to Providence, and now you're in Portland. How have the new surroundings and artistic communities affected your creative progression?

Being in Arkansas was great because it was a tight-knit community. At the time, a lot of the bands were really good. And it did teach us that if you want a show, you have to book the show, and you have to make the flyers and do everything. If you want to tour, you've got to book your own tour. So I think it did instill in us a level of, "If you want something done, you've just got to do it yourself." I feel like a lot of people from that era and towns like that have the same mentality.

And then going to Providence, it was the perfect time for us-late '90s, early 2000s. The Providence music scene was really good at that point. It was also very tight knit. But because it was a small town, bands like Lightning Bolt and Dropdead would play the same show, and I think that helped us to blur those lines of, "You've got to be this thing or that thing." I think it helped inspire us to do whatever we wanted. That helped tremendously as far as music and thinking about things. Load Records and all these other things were happening in Providence that couldn't be defined by a specific genre or anything like that. It was all over the place. I think that helped us out a ton.

And coming out to Portland was different. I don't know many bands in town that we really gel with as far as a sound or ideal-wise or anything. So it's definitely weird to try and navigate that. I feel like we play more with noise bands, but out here is more of a traditional metal scene, which I don't know how well we fit in with. We've been here probably seven or eight years now, and it's a nice place to live. But the thing that gets to us is that it's so rich and gentrified and very white, but then they also play the hand of being very inclusive. It's like, well, you can't do both. You can't have it both ways. But it is beautiful.

Heavy music is often associated with the idea of catharsis. Is that what you get out of it?

Yeah, I think so. It's tough to say how it comes out. I do this with Chip, who's my best friend. We do pretty much everything together. So in that way, it's cathartic to have him along for the ride. And then also we do records with our friends and all these other like-minded people. There is a level of catharsis in a communal effort to achieve something, I think. So I guess I get the catharsis in a different way than most people do. When they hear heavy music, it touches on something different for them. I think for me it touches on an even more hippie aspect of, "I do this thing with my friends." No matter what happens, we have come together in this communal way to do this thing and achieve this goal. So I think that is, if nothing else, inspiring for me. It gives me some hope.

Lee Buford Recommends:

Mary Lattimore - *Silver Ladders*

Julianna Barwick - *Healing is a Miracle*

Oliver Coates - *skins n slime*

Sandra B. Tooze - *Levon* (Levon Helm biography)

Thief (Criterion Collection)

Name

Lee Buford

Vocation

Musician

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Zachary Harrell Jones