August 21, 2024 -

As told to Arielle Gordon, 2548 words.

Tags: Music, Creative anxiety, Process, Production, Money.

On taking humor seriously in your work

Musician Nate Amos (Water From Your Eyes, My Idea, This Is Lorelei) discusses the importance of humor in songwriting, writing melodies that are catchy enough to whistle on their own, and finding focus through writing every day.

Your new album is this really compact collection where every song sounds super different. How do you think about putting together an album, and how do you think about sequencing across disparate genres?

It depends on the project. At a certain point, I realized that I wanted it to be an archetypal album in between 40 and 45 minutes. Enough songs so that it feels like a true album, but not enough that you're sick of it by the end.

With this album, the idea I had was to start off with this very wide range of things and focus as it goes on. So it begins with a country-ish song and then the most straight ahead electronic song on the whole album. From that point on, it's like a funnel. By the end of the album, the last three tracks have a much more unified sound. I feel like a lot of albums tend to start off really focused and then drift as you go through them. I wanted to do the opposite of that, so the whole thing comes into focus rather than dispersing.

As somebody who's so prolific, how were you able to whittle down the songs to include in the 45 minutes?

It was really hard. At one point, this album was 32 songs long and included a phone memo in the middle apologizing for it being too long and trying to explain why it was that long. I listened to it and I was just like, "This is just too much. Let's just do some hard cuts." It was hard because the 30-ish songs I ended up with were all songs I was really happy with and I felt like were good enough to be on the album. Then it became more of a question of what songs felt thematically connected, and these 10 is just where I ended up. Then I began releasing the songs that I cut as a series of EPs, because they were all still songs I was really happy with.

In the past, I've very much been like, "Okay, everything made in this period of time goes on the album." I like the idea of the process being exposed like that: Rather than it being a carefully presented thing, it's just an eye into that world, warts and all. This album was hard because I was cutting songs that felt good enough to be on the album, but they just didn't have the right shape.

The ten songs that did make it all fit very neatly together as a puzzle, even though they are very different. That goes back to the idea of the funnel, starting off scattered and then coming into focus, both sonically and lyrically. Whittling it down to those songs really became a question of, "Okay, what combinations of things work well? What songs that I really like still just feel out of place?" It was a different process for me, because a lot of the time it's way more haphazard than that. I thought way more critically about how this was put together.

Your job is being a musician, but is there anything you do to keep it fun and creative and not to feel like you're clocking in at work?

I'm touring more now than I used to, but if anything, I spend way more time not working on music now than I used to. I used to just make music all the time and not get paid anything for it. So now it's actually a little easier now, and it's a job, so it's still fun. Maybe that'll change at some point, but right now I'm having a good time.

Has having a bigger audience changed your creative process?

It definitely makes it a little more nerve wracking, but in a good way. When you're making music and you don't even know if anyone's going to hear it, you're not worrying about it that much, which in some cases can be a really good thing. But if anything, I think I'm trying a little harder now, I'm thinking a little more carefully about it. At the same time, I don't want to change it up too much. So I try to forget that people will hear it at all and tap into the headspace where I just make something and see what happens.

Is there anything you do in particular to get into that head space when you want to make new music?

Just spending time by myself. It's hard for me to fully enter the creative writing space if I'm very socially active at a given time. I'm already an introvert and making music is my favorite thing to do, so it's very easy, but also very productive, for me to just take a month off from all things social and just live inside the creative space.

Do you have a daily songwriting practice?

If I'm spending a month working on music, I'll try to at least come up with one song a day until a project has taken shape. Then I can be a little more intentional about it and spend longer periods of time honing in on a particular piece. But in order for it to stop being a "make something new every day" situation, a blurry image of the larger project that's being worked on has to begin to emerge. I write as quickly as possible until there's a trail to follow, and then just follow that trail at whatever speed feels natural.

How would you describe the concept of This is Lorelei?

It changes album to album, but with this album, I was trying to simultaneously appreciate and poke fun at a lot of songwriters that I really love in a way that wouldn't upset them, but it's just playing with the idea. They're not the songs that I would've written unless I was just like, "Okay, I'm going to lean into this slightly satirical, stereotypical singer-songwriter thing." And that part of the process is what I really remember, which is why I think it's funny to me, because I hear it and it's just like, "That doesn't sound like a song that I would write, but I like it."

With this album, the concept was very much to use a medium that I could chuckle at in order to say things that I wouldn't be laughing about. The more of a character you have, the more comfortable you become saying the hard stuff, because it's not you, it's the character, even if the character is you. If you convince yourself that it isn't, then all of a sudden it becomes way easier to reach a certain point of vulnerability, where it becomes hopefully relatable for people, or at least identifiable.

Are the lyrics on the album taken from your personal life?

A lot of this album was zoning in on very familiar lyrical themes that show up in classic singer-songwriter music and leaning to the point where it meets its opposite: You got God, Satan, light, dark, then money and gasoline and stuff. There was a template that was drawn from the pool of traditional songwriting, as I understand it anyway, and then being as honest as I could within that character. It's this weird combination: it's very earnest, but it's also very much a bit, and I'm not really sure which parts are which. It's strange for me to listen to the album, because to me, the songs are all really funny, even the ones that are very heavy. Even if the content itself isn't funny, the way it's presented in these stereotypical songwriter ways is funny to me. I don't know if it's a funny listening experience for other people, but I think it's a funny album.

I was curious about the role humor plays in your creative process. How much of it is trying to make yourself laugh?

I think it's easier to approach heavier content if you come at it from an angle of lightness. It seems like there's this perceived need for music all to be very serious when, to me, good drama is comedy and tragedy and everything in between. The lighter side of it will accent the heavier side, and the heavier side will accent the lighter side.

It's not so much about adding humor on purpose as it is just not excluding it, because both sides of it are an equal part of the human experience. Ultimately when you're making music, I think that is the goal: to provide some sort of balanced commentary on what it's like to be alive. At least for me, all the music that I really love is that way, where it's equally reasonable and absurd. At a certain point, that just became the way that I approach music in general.

How does a song begin to take shape for you?

One of the things I worked on with this album was focusing on the lyrics and the melody more so than everything else. A lot of my songs have started with the music and the texture, and then the lyrics and melodies are all framed inside of that. I wanted to do the opposite with this one and have melodies that could stand on their own without the instrumentation. I wanted it to sound just as natural if you were walking in the woods, whistling them as they do with accompaniment. A lot of these songs started with melodies that I would hum into my phone while I was walking somewhere. "Dancing in the Club" and "All Fucked Up" were both written that way.

A lot of them started with just writing a song on an acoustic guitar, which is something that I haven't done that much of recently. I think the only one that truly started on a computer that made it onto the final album is "Perfect Hand," the second track. That one started with the beats and then grew from there,

which is the default process for most projects I've normally worked on. The whole approach to this album was very different than things I've done in the past. I had a lot of the ideas organized mentally before ever really putting it down on paper or computer.

I know you stopped smoking weed when you were writing this album. How did that impact your creative process?

I didn't smoke weed for a year and a half, and this album was written at the very beginning of that. Actually, the reason I started writing what eventually became this album was to figure out if I could write music without smoking weed. It turned out it was easy, but I would just write way too many words. So all of a sudden I had an issue with, "Okay, this song has literally three too many verses."

That was also the first two months of not smoking weed after smoking weed every day for 15 years or so. I think I was just in a little bit of a hyperactive state. In general, weed always helps me write music. It always has. It just helps me calm down and focus. That's why I think this album is way more anxiety driven than a lot of my other music. Listening back to it is really interesting, because if I had been smoking weed, I'm sure it would've been a totally different album.

When do you know a song is too long, and how do you know which parts to cut?

In this case it was having a manager who said, "This is great, but these songs are really long." So I tried to make a lot of them as concise as possible while still getting across the main points. Interesting things happen then, because if you remove a little bit of context from the song, then all of a sudden some of the lyrics become way more isolated and you have less of a clue to figuring it out. I do a lot of math crossword puzzles. Sometimes the easy ones have it so if you just keep putting stuff in, they'll all reveal the other things, whereas sometimes you just start off with a few numbers and you just have to figure it out by trying a bunch of different stuff. So it's like removing clues from the puzzle.

What were your goals when you started This is Lorelei over ten years ago and how have they changed?

It started off as a side project from whatever else I had going on at the time. There's always been a main band, and Lorelei started as an anything-goes stomping ground for experimentation and songwriting practice. The first eight or nine years of the Lorelei catalog are very much that way. It was whatever I happened to make without the pressure of it having to fit into some overall concept, which was nice, because it allowed for the project to develop a voice very naturally. I didn't push it along at all; it was like gravity slowly happened and then all of a sudden I know what this project sounds like. Now it's the zone for the more traditional parts of how I like to write music. If Water From Your Eyes is staring into the abyss, Lorelei is embracing reality a little bit more. They're opposite projects in a lot of ways.

What is Sandwich Rock? I've seen you reference it in projects and in interviews for a decade, so I thought I'd ask.

I don't even remember. I think that Sandwich Rock was actually coined by my childhood best friend and longtime band mate, Ryan Murphy. It's just become a really easy go-to answer, because I don't know what kind of music I make, I can't tell. To me, by the time I'm done with it, it sounds like nothing. So that's what I tend to gravitate to when people are like, "You know, what genre are you?" It's just like, "Well, I don't know, Sandwich Rock. I like sandwiches and I like to rock." I had this band called Opposites for a long time, and Sandwich Rock was one of three genres we had listed on our Bandcamp tags: Sandwich Rock, Flavor Wave, Noblemen's Round or something like that [Ed: the tag is actually "savorywave"]. It was just absurd. Sandwich Rock just stuck with me, I guess.

Since you're playing a show later today, I was curious if Water From Your Eyes has any pre-show routines.

We stand in a circle and put our hands in and Rachel says, "When I say fuck, you say fuck." And then we do these three chants of "fuck!" and everyone tries to go up, but I sabotage everyone and hit all the hands down. So that's the Water From Your Eyes pre-show routine. I don't remember exactly when or how it started, but we've done it hundreds and hundreds of times at this point.

Nate Amos recommends:

Eating capachas

Listening to *Lateralus* by Tool

Reading *Sphere* by Michael Crichton

Playing Poker

Watching Jet Lag: The Game

<u>Name</u>
Nate Amos

<u>Vocation</u>
musician

<u>Fact</u>

Related to Musician Nate Amos on taking humor seriously in your work:

■ Musician Molly Rankin on the importance of taking your time

■ Circuit des Yeux on finding your true self through your work

■ Artist and composer Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe on embracing the unknown

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by Kickstarter, PBC. See also: Terms, Privacy Policy.

↑