On rejecting nihilism

Musician Peter Silberman (The Antlers) discusses organizing an album, protecting his privacy, and taking care of the planet before it's too late.

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As told to Arielle Gordon , 2301 words.

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The lyrics on your new album, *Blight*, explicitly reference catastrophe and global collapse, rather than gesture at these topics through metaphor. What motivated that shift?

As a songwriter, there's a couple of reasons that I end up using metaphor. Sometimes it's to conceal real life details, almost in a way of protecting my own privacy. [The Antler's 2009 album] *Hospice* pulled a lot of direct details from my relationship at that time. After the fact, there was something unsettling for me about having very specific points of reference to me and another person. I became more careful about what I shared afterwards.

On *Blight*, it just felt like there was going to be more power in naming the details. So much of the record is about aspects of our environment that we've become desensitized to. Spelling them out in really plain language felt powerful, like drawing attention to something that you overlook.

Can you talk about the choice to use contemporary phrases like *add to cart*, *deactivate*, and *scrolling* on the record? Was there any concern that these lyrics might one day feel pinned to 2025?

It's actually something I've avoided for a long time because I didn't want to date the work. Technology and cultural shorthands move so fast. I think back to earlier work with references that might sound outdated by now. "Bear," on *Hospice*, mentions a "snowy television." Someone who grew up without cable TV would not really know what that is referring to. It's almost optimistic to think we're not going to be scrolling in 10 years. Maybe scrolling will take some other form, and this record will be an artifact of a bygone era. But it was really hard to write about subjects like consumerism on *Blight* without pointing to them directly with ordinary phrases.

For an album about living on the brink of apocalypse, *Blight* is melodically quite gentle, even soothing at times. Did you set out to contrast the heavier themes with a softer sound?

That balance is somewhat intentional. The last record, *Green to Gold*, didn't have any darkness to it, which was reflective of my mental state at the time; I was interested in the passage of time and melancholy and nostalgia. There are a lot of really pretty moments on *Blight*, but I don't know that it has a lot of optimism in it. That was by design. The moments reminiscent of natural beauty serve as a reminder that we're not living in a completely industrial hellscape. We have precious little of this left, and we need to remember what matters before it's too late for that. On "Deactivate," there is this big, flourishing, beautiful moment, but it's meant to be synthetic, an artificial paradise that contrasts this deteriorating world that people are leaving because it's become uninhabitable.

Do you think about the pace and sequence of an album from the outset, or is it something that happens later, after the songs have been recorded?

It usually comes about pretty early on. There are songs where I know right away, “This is the first song; this is the last song; this is the penultimate song.” I can usually just tell where they belong, at least for those bookends. Usually in the middle there is a little bit of a question of what comes where. For this record, the sequence revealed itself pretty early on. That was partly because I did think of it as one long story that was going from the micro to the macro. It was going from considering our choices as consumers, considering the waste and convenience that it feels sort of ordinary and insignificant, and thinking, “What happens? What happens with this? What is the ultimate outcome? Where does it all go?”

I needed to start with something soft and smooth, just everyday feelings. There is a feeling of guilt at the end of that first song, but still there is something small and domestic about it. From there it needed to stretch out time a little bit, thinking about the effect of these little choices over the course of a few decades, concentrated to one area—a “what goes around comes around” karmic story. Then it goes into this change of awareness, when suddenly all you can see around you is the damage and the suffering and pollution. Roadkill is a great example of something that is so easy to ignore until you start paying attention to it, and then it’s heartbreaking and you see it everywhere and you can’t look away.

I’ve really loved science fiction for a long time. I feel like sometimes the most effective approach to speak about the present is to imagine a future that doesn’t seem so farfetched. But I felt like I couldn’t start there. It had to sort of transition into that after spending some time in a very grounded, present-day reality. You need to show the transition from now to what’s next, go to the edges of the earth and edges of consciousness, and draw it out to its most extreme possibilities before bringing it back and saying, “These are questions we need to deal with. We don’t know how much time we have left if we don’t change how we are. And are we really prepared to face these consequences? They’re not science fiction, they’re reality.” The sequencing needed to follow a path that would make sense and that would bring a listener on that journey of the thought experiment or the anxiety spiral. I felt like it needed to end with an instrumental track. It felt a little bit like, “You’ve heard me go on and on and on and on. Let the land speak for itself. Let nature speak for itself. Here’s a vision of what’s to come, which is a world without people, and it’s just burning and the wind is howling and the rockets are leaving.” Then it cuts out.

A song like “Something in the Air” encapsulates that simmering sense of doom—an ominous vibe shift, if you will. What was the process like of writing that song?

The original idea for that came from a few years ago. We were driving down to a show at [the NYC venue] Le Poisson Rouge during that time that the wildfire smoke from Canada had blown down. I think everyone remembers that, because the city just totally transformed. I remember driving down and just seeing this orange sky, and it just felt like we were driving into an apocalyptic, dystopian hellscape. I remember driving through lower Manhattan on the way to the venue. The city sort of seemed like it was business as usual. I remember people outside wearing masks and whatnot, but I also remember seeing people just leaning against a building smoking a cigarette.

It got me thinking about this as a new normal. It was the most salient point to focus on if I was going to write about it—not how fucked up it is, but how normal this sort of occurrence was becoming, and how much we as a society were capable of getting used to. It’s just such a weird idea that we could get used to:”Oh, there’s these days where we don’t go outside because it’s poison.” There was a fair amount of that during COVID, too. As destabilizing as that was, to a large extent, we got used to these new protocols. And then as soon as we were able to stop doing them, eventually everyone was like, “Well, let’s just stop thinking about that and forget about that.”

I was thinking about things like mass shootings as well, how there are these new normals. I was talking to friends with school-age kids where they have active shooter drills in their schools, which sounds so horrifying to me. But it got me wondering, “Is this the new fire drill? Is this the thing that you go through enough of them and you stop thinking about what it’s actually about and it becomes more routine?” In that song, I had a little pushback, because the details and the descriptions are so mundane. But to me that was really the point: it’s an ordinary day, and it’s made to sound ordinary and unexceptional and undramatic. It’s just, “Oh yeah, don’t open your window today.”

On *Blight*, especially on songs like "A Great Flood," there's an undercurrent of faith, redemption, and forgiveness. Can you talk about the way religion plays into your work?

"A Great Flood" was the first song that I wrote for the record. I was experimenting with a vocal harmonizer, and the result sounded very hymnal to me. Lyrically, it also felt kind of hymnal. I wasn't sure why that was or where that came from, but as I spent a lot of time with the record, it started to occur to me that that song, and maybe the record as a whole, is considering the moral and ethical implications of the way we live.

I was thinking about what questions are at the center of acting as an ethical consumer and taking care of the planet, and almost rejecting the nihilism that could enter into the picture if you just feel like everything is fucked and that it's too late to do anything about it. I think that that is a dangerous line of thinking right now. It is reminiscent of the choice to be a moral person for the promise of getting into heaven. There's a similar idea that we should only take care of the planet so that it'll survive, and that's a great reason to do it. But even if we discovered that it was too late and that there's nothing to be done, I think we have to ask ourselves the questions like, "Well, shouldn't we take care of it anyway? Shouldn't we treat all the creatures on this earth with compassion and care, not so we gain anything from it but because we know that this is the right thing to do?" It's sort of about the soul of humanity. It's also a big question as AI and things like that enter into the picture, and we're trying to understand for ourselves what differentiates us from an artificial intelligence. It's kind of ineffable. We don't have easy answers for it, but it lies somewhere in the heart.

On that note, I'm curious about your thoughts on the use of AI in music.

So far I haven't had any reason to explore any of it directly. I'm aware of what's going on out there, and I've had friends send me AI music that they made just because they were like, "Wow, isn't this crazy?" I think for them it's morbid curiosity, and I think I'm less of an absolutist for or against. AI is just too big a subject to completely write off or completely embrace. But I think as it pertains to music, I have not really heard a compelling argument for why we need this. If the environmental and ecological energy impacts could be solved, theoretically there are uses for AI that could really benefit humanity. But that's a big *if*, and we are not there yet. There need to be huge changes to infrastructure in order for that to happen. In the meantime, what limited energy we have is going towards creating slop.

As it pertains to music, AI seems to be solving a problem that didn't exist, as if music wasn't already incredibly easy to make, even if you have no technical musical skill whatsoever. There was already a huge surplus of music being created and released all the time. The issue was never, "This isn't easy enough to make, or there's not enough of this." I don't really see what the benefit is right now. What I see happening is AI-generated music polluting these platforms that are already inundated with real music, or this really weird scammy phenomenon of actual artists having fake AI tracks being released under their names. It just happened to a few friends of mine. Or the ability to create music that is perfectly tailored to exactly what you want, which is the kind of thing that Liz Pelly is talking about in her book. We're getting used to having this perfectly tailored, curated thing served to us on a silver platter. It's ignoring this very basic function of music and art. You don't always know what it is that you need to hear, and sometimes you need to be surprised and challenged.

Peter Silberman recommends:

Alphasmart Neo2 Word Processor Essentially a clicky, 90s-style keyboard and a small LCD screen that can only display a couple lines of text, completely offline and self-contained. Found cheap on eBay!

Steering the Craft by Ursula K. Le Guin Probably the best and most concise story-writing guidebook I've come across. A mix of her philosophy, advice, and simple but challenging writing exercises.

Tetris. There's something strangely grounding about maintaining order, keeping calm as it speeds up, letting it stack all the way to the top when it becomes too much, and starting over.

No news / social media until noon (at earliest). Carve out a few hours to let your world be small: limited to you, the people physically nearby, and those you can reach directly. The rest of the world will be there later, but don't let it rule all day every day.

4-7-8 breathing. A calming / focusing technique popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil: inhaling for 4 seconds, holding for 7 seconds, breathing out for 8 seconds. Then repeating the process a few times.

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