On following the idea

Musician Phil Elverum on parenting in a pandemic, expressing universal truths through personal details, and finding the beauty in uncertainty.

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As told to Rebecca Hiscott, 2910 words.

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How have you been staying grounded in quarantine?

Parenting, I guess, is the answer. It's just me and a five-year-old in the house. That's grounding in a way because there's no ambiguity about what my job is. I still have to make all the meals and do all the laundry every day. There's not really much room to mentally deteriorate.

Do you find you've had to explain this moment to her? How do you explain it to a child?

I've always taken the parenting approach of, I just tell her everything. In her five years of life, she's been through so much weird and difficult change. Also, maybe it's just my personality. I've always spoken to her pretty directly and tell her what's going on without overemphasizing the devastation. She listens to the radio with me when I have the news on. *Democracy Now!* is pretty apocalyptic, and she picks up on that. I turn it off when it gets too gory, or talking specifics of these police murders. She's very smart and I think she has the mental capacity to take on these global cathartic transformations. I hope.

Do you think of *Microphones in 2020* as a "quarantine record"?

No, I don't think of it as one, although I recognize that it maybe works well in quarantine. There's some things about it that are well suited toward a time when people have this mandatory longer attention span, perhaps. But it was not planned out that way. I started working on it over a year ago, so I didn't know this was coming.

The album is about you reflecting on who you were at that time, when you were recording as The Microphones, and who you are now. I'm curious what brought that on.

Most concretely, it was because last summer, the summer of 2019, we did a re-staging of this music festival that we used to put on in Anacortes called What the Heck Fest. We decided, let's have the same lineup as the first one, which was in 2003. So that meant that The Microphones should play. It was just a small thing, and I didn't think much of it. But once I noticed that, I was like, "Oh, wait. What does that even mean, to play a Microphones show?" It's not my style to go back and reminisce and play the hits from the past. "Hits" in deep quotes there. But yeah, that started the wheels turning.

But also, I think, on a deeper level, I was just in a state after lots of disorienting life changes of death and marriage and heartbreak and divorce and moving. I was spun out. I was like, "Who am I? Who am I even anymore?" I didn't know how to move forward, and I felt like the best thing I could do is pause, take a deep look at what had brought me to this point, and then maybe I'd know more who I was.

I think there's something about this moment that's prompting the same deep reflection for a lot of people. You've

made music that grapples with illness and fear and uncertainty in such a personal way, and now it's like the entire world is dealing with that more publicly. Does it feel different to be making the kind of music you make now, knowing more people are feeling or expressing those things?

I hadn't thought of that until you just said it. I think it's a good thing, though. Because like I say over and over in the song, the true state of all things is uncertainty. That's the reality we all live with. And mostly, we have to go through life masking in various ways, because it would be too hardcore to wake up every day and be like, "We're all going to die." But now we're in this state where that undercurrent is less hidden. I think that's a good thing. I think we all can benefit from being more honest about uncertainty and difficulty.

What was the recording process like? You mentioned it was before you had to self-isolate, so were you in a studio? Were you collaborating with others, or was it a very solitary process?

It was very solitary, for sure. It usually is. Almost all the records I've made have been that way. And "studio" for me these days is just a room in my house, or, actually, it's my bedroom. Part of my bedroom has a desk with simple recording setup there, and that's good enough for me. I started [the song] and made lots of changes and revisions as it developed over the year of writing and recording it, and recorded parts and erased parts. It changed a lot. I gave myself lots of space to sit with it and mull it over.

When you started, did you know you were setting out to make a 45-minute song that would become its own album?

I knew I wanted to make a very long song, and I thought if I could make it 20 minutes, that would be so insane. And then it just kept growing. I never thought, "I'm going to make it this number of minutes long." I truly was following the idea, and it seemed to need that much breathing room. And I was pushing it. I was pushing against the limits of my attention and what the idea could hold. And trying to be vigilant about not having any filler. I don't know if anyone would buy that, but I truly tried to trim out any extraneous stuff.

I don't know what it's like to write a novel or a book of words, but I imagine that it was similar to the process this song took, which is having an outline and moving sections around and zooming in to look at the way certain passages or chapters work, but then also trying to always zoom out to see how the thing flows as a whole. Usually in songwriting, you don't get to zoom out as far. Maybe if you're thinking about album sequencing, but this was really interesting because it was one piece that was a longer emotional trip to go on. I really enjoyed the opportunity to think about the larger scope, the larger sequence.

How did you translate the words into music?

Sort of hand in hand. There's just two chords, pretty much, so I knew I had this foundation. That was the bedrock of the thing. I knew that I enjoyed the sound of those chords indefinitely, and that it was okay to lay down a foundation of that, it could encompass whatever I wanted to put in it.

Yeah. There's something about the music, especially the seven-minute wordless build at the beginning—you really feel the passage of time.

My idea with that part was to go for long enough that you forgot whatever you were doing before you put the song on. To brainwash you until you're in the world of the song now. And it goes for long enough that all the different layers of things fall away, sort of like meditation. Going for long enough, breathing in and out, nothing happening, so the only thing that exists is the song.

It's demanding a lot of attention from the listener, and I know not everyone's going to do that, but it's possible to do that. I feel like that's the kind of work I want to make, without expecting anyone will do it. It's like, I put broccoli in front of my daughter every night and I know she's not going to eat it every night, but I still put it in front of her. That's my ideal.

But also, there are probably some people, especially at this moment in time, who would love to give 45 minutes of

their attention to a meditative song that has nothing to do with the moment they're living through.

Right. Yeah. I've been happy to discover that's true. There are lots of people who are into it. And it's not escapist, I hope. It's not only a way out, because there's plenty of things to distract ourselves with that are much longer than 45 minutes on the internet. I wanted to somehow go deeper into whatever the opposite of distraction is.

There's a film that goes with this song where you're laying out hundreds of photos you've taken over the years. Did you always have that in mind?

No, that was a last-minute thing, but I like it a lot. And actually, at this moment, while we're talking, I'm scanning in all 800 of those photos, because I decided to make a book version of it.

I decided I needed to make a lyric video because I really do not like music videos. Music videos are usually weird and corny. Plus, it's a lot of footage. I didn't have enough archival footage to use, but I did have all these photos. And it was the pandemic time of quarantine and I was at home going through the archives anyway. Just a perfect slideshow.

So maybe not a quarantine record, but a quarantine music video.

Yeah. Sorting through my junk.

You paired the photos to the lyrics. How did you do that? Was it just instinctive?

It was instinctive, but I did spend a long time organizing it. I spent, I think, three weeks going through the photos and charting out the songs. I had this whole mathematical system of how long each line takes and exactly which measure of the song each line hit on and how many photos I needed per measure. I mapped it all out. Every photo is importantly in place. Sometimes it's literally apparent why a photo goes with a particular line, but usually it's more of a poetic connection, which I really liked playing with.

In your 2017 TCI interview, you talked about these guidelines for writing music you'd created: "Close and direct. Dense with easy words. Say everything as it is. No metaphors." Do those writing guidelines still shape your approach to songwriting, or do you feel they were more specific to what you were trying to accomplish at that time?

They're more specific to that record and the one that came after it. I also have been writing in that same mode a little bit, at least with this Microphones record. It's half and half. Half autobiography, half poetry, or wherever the line is between those two things. If I make another record, I hope it's not more self-reflective, literal, explicit autobiography, because I've gone maybe to the limits of what I can ask of people to care about my specifics. I want to make short songs that are ambiguous.

It's a weird thing to make music or art and put it out into the world. There's a certain level of self-deception or self-delusion that goes into it, for me, at least. I simultaneously don't expect anyone to care or listen, yet I do release it and press it on vinyl and ship it around the world and try to get people to pay attention. So I both care and… Well, I definitely care. It's more like I feel shy or something about asking for people's attention in these times where there's so much to pay attention to. And also, so much that's way more important than some guy in the Pacific Northwest thinking about when he was 20 years old. These are not the big pressing issues of our day, at least on the surface.

Although I think I'm being self-contradictory here, because I also am trying to go deeper and talk about what I view as the pressing issues of our day, which are, like, we need to acknowledge uncertainty and transformation and impermanence. That actually is important to me.

That was a rambling way of saying I don't expect people to like this, and I don't think that much about the

listener. I just intuitively follow the idea, and whether or not it's going to be heard by anyone is an afterthought.

That's a really interesting tension, probably for anyone who makes art.

Yeah. Some people, I think, have an easier time with just knowing that "this thing I'm making, it's so good, it's going to change the world, everyone needs to hear it." But it's not so simple for me. I'm really like, "I made this thing, I don't know if you care. It's here. Oh, you like it? Okay, thanks. Wow. Weird. What a surprise."

Doing press about it, like we're doing right now, I feel like it works for me because I take it as an extension of making the thing itself. It's an opportunity to elaborate more on the idea, not necessarily to get more attention for my ego or to make more money. It's more just to go deeper into the project itself.

I was recently reading a TCI article where a painter describes her process as a love-hate relationship. It's painful, it's a struggle, and sometimes she really hates it. But also, it's the only thing that has consistently made her happy. What's your relationship with songwriting like?

I don't hate it. I don't think I've ever hated it. But there have been times where it's felt like a struggle, like I agonize a little bit more over what should be said, if anything. Usually I have this feeling like the world is so full of content, and who am I to clog it up even more, so I feel like I have to say the best possible thing every time. It has to be so necessary, otherwise why release anything? That's been the main difficulty.

It's just a constant presence, and I feel like I've known it was going to be constant since the beginning. Since before anyone paid attention, I knew, well, I'm going to be doing this forever. This is just necessary for me, regardless of attention. But if my job was some other job, I'd still be coming home in the evening and working on this creative pursuit and its many forms.

Do you get writer's block? How do you get through it?

I just let it sit there. Yeah, I do get it. It's more like ideas come in waves and I don't try and force it. Although I haven't for a while. In the past year and a half, I can't keep up with the ideas. I have a lot of ideas, and that's a great feeling. It hasn't been this way for a long time.

On a micro, day-to-day level, what does success mean for you? What does a successful day or a successful project look like?

On a day-to-day level, music and art is not that big a part of my life, honestly. It's a thing that I am able to do in my little windows of "me time" that fold into my single parenting life, which is mostly unrelated to music and art. So success in that realm is my daughter and I do cool stuff with our day and eat good food and go to bed before it's too late.

But a successful music project is when it touches through to people. I used to be more hung up on this feeling of misunderstanding, like, "No, that's not what I meant, let me clarify. I'll make another album to clarify the misunderstandings of the one before." It was this never-ending cycle of poetic struggle. But I feel like I found a kind of peace with an acceptance that misunderstanding is inevitable. Now I just feel like it's successful if it creates a deeper perception in anyone who hears it.

Is there a lyric from *Microphones in 2020* that best describes your state of mind right now?

The one that just popped into my head is, "It's just chaos heaving." Right now at the window here in Washington, it's apocalyptic, smoke-filled skies. We're on an island that is more exposed to the ocean wind, so it gets cleared out more than other parts of the state. We have friends in Portland who are just like, "The world is ending."

Well, that’s a grim and sad note to end on. But it feels real.

[*laughs*] Well, yeah. I don’t want to be grim and sad. And also, my being hung up on making these albums where I’m advocating for acceptance of uncertainty… I think it often gets taken as, like, “Oh, he’s so sad and depressed. That guy makes sad music. He’s always talking about impermanence and how everything is.” But I don’t feel that way at all. I feel like it’s joyful. I tried to get at that in this Microphones thing. So, yeah, the skies are full of smoke outside and fascist mania is on the rise and police are murdering people, and it truly does feel like the world is ending. Nonetheless, it’s incredible that we get to be conscious and experience anything. That, to me, is the takeaway that supersedes all of this possible grimness.

Phil Elverum Recommends:

Raw almond butter

Swedish black pine tar

Sinéad O’Connor, *Gospel Oak* EP

Koffee, “Toast”

Ulver, *Bergtatt: Et Eeventyr i 5 Capitler*

Name
Phil Elverum

Vocation
Musician

Katy Hancock