

On the power of doing it yourself



Musicians Andrew VanWyngarden and Ben Goldwasser (MGMT) discuss subverting expectations, working outside the machine, and being happy with what you're making.

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As told to Jon Ieland, 2979 words.

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

You're clearly off any regular cadence of releasing music at this point. So how did you wind up making another album? After *Little Dark Age*, did you know you were going to make another album or was it just something that could happen again or maybe it doesn't happen again, and we'll find out?

Andrew: I think at this point, we're like lab monkeys that were conditioned after decades. Even though we aren't on a label, we're kind of like, "Oh every five years, you have to make an album now." Even though nobody was telling us we had to, there's no contract or anything. It's like we're these five year cicadas. We come out of the ground, we're like, "Oh, we have to do this." And usually, if it works right and everything comes together, we end up feeling like we also aren't sure why we're making another album, but we're happy we are doing it.

Ben: What was really nice about this time around, and not being tied to any sort of set schedule or album cycle, was that it felt like when we did come around to earnestly working on this album, it wasn't coming from a place of anxiety or thinking about what's going to happen to the music once it comes out. We just felt like we had this thing in us that was ready to come out. I can't remember finishing a record and liking it as much at the end. I'm still enjoying the music that we made and I can still listen to it and not be reminded of the stress of the process or something. It feels like a very joyous album to me.

There is the music that you are creating, but then there's a way that you go about your work that seems both playful and critiquing the entire structure around making music and the industry. For instance, there is the press release for this album, which is very tongue-in-cheek. The first track of the album is "Loss Of Life, Pt. 2." You once organized a massage and fog machine listening party for the studio during the production of *Little Dark Age*. At this point, what is motivating you to keep subverting the forms around the way music is produced, marketed, and capitalized?

Andrew VanWyngarden: I think that we've always had sort of a self-awareness and sometimes it's dipped into a self-consciousness that can have a negative effect on creating—but when it's working right, we have an awareness of ourselves and our ability to poke fun at the situation. I think something it's really easy to poke fun at is musicians taking themselves too seriously, which most musicians do. Especially having not toured and having just been doing normal stuff at home for years now, it really puts into stark contrast this kind of rockstar world. We're not coming at it like Weird Al or Spinal Tap or something, but I think there's always been a sort of prankster element to our band and we find ways to express it. Where we're riding the line is where it's not a joke and we really mean what we're saying. We have, especially with this album, a very positive intention and goal, but it's going to take some teasing and some mischief to express it.

Ben Goldwasser: In some ways it goes back to our early shows in college just sort of pretending that we were huge rock stars, but we obviously weren't and we were just playing at a house party. And then getting signed to a major label where there was this constant feeling of, "Are you sure you really want to sign us?" We weren't putting ourselves out there in that way at all, and we just kind of found ourselves in this situation. There was never a moment where we were like, "All right, we're really going to go for it as a band and promote ourselves."

Andrew: And then strangely with this album, when we're finally not on a label and now we're on an independent label, we're just happening to make some of our most accessible music since our first album. I think part of that is that there were so many aspects of being on a major label and part of that big machine that were just really unpleasant and we're just celebrating the fact that we're more creatively liberated now. We've actually always just kind of done what we felt like doing at the moment and we've managed to sustain this sort of fan base that sees that and I think appreciates that. And we're not really ambitious in the sense that we don't want to try to expand our fan base and become the most popular band in the world. We just want to keep being ourselves and delivering the goods to the people that understand it.

I want to press into the difference between being in the machine, which has a lot of parts of it that you don't like, and being free of it. What is that difference? Because it's a machine that so many people aspire to be inside of, whether or not they understand what that machine really is.

Andrew: It's not solely a major label-related thing. You can be in the machine and be on a very small label. It seems more and more these days what comes first is the image and the brand and the personal identity. And we've never had that for better or worse. I've never felt like our band was one thing. I've never felt like my voice was one style. We've played around with so many different genres, and so I think it's fun for us to sort of subvert expectations first of all.

A difference on a basic level, is that we don't have five people that we have to pass ideas, songs, song structures, and artwork by. We're doing it all ourselves, which is really nice. And I think that we've opened up to collaboration a lot more, especially on this album. We have way more producers and friends jumping on board than we ever have. When you are a part of the machine like we were in this kind of old school way, what comes back to the band? I'm not complaining. I think we have very blessed privileged luxurious lifestyles, but I mean it is kind of ridiculous in the music industry what comes back to the artists and the songwriters after everybody else gets their share. And because we weren't thinking about that when we were making this album, we opened up the gates and allowed lots of people to join in and have sort of a family-style production.

Ben: I was reading this thing recently that was comparing Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk to feudal lords and we're all kind of in this serfdom. It's basically if we exist in this world, we're basically existing to serve these billionaires. And I think there's a lot of truth to that, and it's the kind of thing that the more you really think about it, the more it really bums you out unless you go totally off the grid, which is also a pretty extreme decision and not necessarily liberating. It's unavoidable. And I think for us, we've found a lot of freedom in not feeling a need to respond to that right now or to have a commentary about it, but just to try to express ourselves without feeling like it needs to fit into a box.

Andrew: Also, we named our band The Management when we started off, which was both a reference to *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, but also we thought it was so funny because we were the artists and we were called The Management, and I think we enjoy just pushing that and finding our own little idiosyncratic ways to be subversive and that makes ourselves chuckle because we like chuckling.

For as much independence as you've always asserted in your work, you are still constrained by the form, not just within the context of being in a major label, but just the practice. Albums have a certain form, album launches have a certain construct. This conversation is part of that construct. Concerts have a typical construction. Are there things that you would like to do outside of those forms, whether or not they seem possible?

Ben: I think it's a little bit of a trap to try to express yourself in a way that's never been done before. And I think... My wife is a huge film nerd and she was talking about this idea that every film is a genre film if you look at it. It's like every film is a western or a zombie movie or a noir, even if it appears like something

else, you can sort of still fit it into this pattern. And I think there's something exciting about operating within patterns and playing with those expectations a little bit, but also not being afraid to just be like, "Yes, this does fit into this mold in some way." In a way that's more liberating.

I think that we've always been a band that really likes to obviously play with influences and reference different styles of music. We just did this festival where we performed our first record all the way through and turned it into more of a stage show and had little comedy bits in the middle of it and stuff like that. I mean, that was a super cool experience where we actually got to construct this thing that we could really put a lot of time into, and it was totally different from anything we'd really done in terms of performance. So I think that did get us thinking about how can we stay excited about performing especially.

I was curious about that because you've also always put intention into the performance aspects of what you do and try to play around with it. But I also know from your last interview with The Creative Independent that you don't necessarily like the experience of touring. When do you enjoy performing at the most and how do you find that place where you actually enjoy touring and performance?

Ben: I don't know. I mean, honestly, I get pretty bummed out every time I think about the structure of the live music business. Especially since COVID, and seeing how that affected people on every level...I think it exposed the greed of a lot of people who were like, "How are we going to continue to make money off of these people?" And, then, the effect on independent venues, the effect on musicians that were living hand-to-mouth, having to make a decision of whether we risk touring in this time when there's a deadly infectious disease going on? Seeing how it affected people who work on the crew at live shows. It's just all really depressing to me and I think that whatever we end up doing with live performance moving forward, I don't want to be a part of the problem. Add carbon emissions to everything, too. So it's basically a lot of bad stuff.

Andrew: I envisioned touring the way we were doing it as if we were in a Zeppelin that was powered by dirty fuel flying around the world. The Zeppelin inside was super luxurious and nice, but also that's all we ever saw. You're literally in a bubble and COVID burst that bubble for me and made it so that I don't want to go back in that darn balloon.

How do you avoid the balloon?

Andrew: We just don't do it. We're not going to play shows.

You're not going to play shows for your new album?

Andrew: Yeah.

I didn't know you could opt out like that.

Andrew: Yeah, we didn't either until we just said, no, it's fine.

Ben: I think right now we're playing with this idea and who knows, maybe we'll look back in two years and just be like, "Wow, we really just destroyed our careers by deciding not to go on tour." Or maybe we'll be like, "That was the best decision we ever made." If we do do some kind of live performance, I think being able to approach it from the idea of something that we'd want to do in the moment and really care about, that's way more exciting to me than feeling like it's just another step in the process of releasing an album.

Otherwise, it's like now we have to go on tour and convince people that this music we just made is good. I want to put on a show where it's like people are excited to hear the new music and know it and not have to convince them of it. It is still fun to play *Kids* live, but to play a show where we know that so many people in the crowd are just waiting to hear *Kids* is not very inspiring.

Andrew: As usual, I have these very polar opposite desires where I either want to play a living room show where

I'm on acoustic guitar and Ben's on a Wurlitzer and we're singing to a small group and it's just this beautiful thing or go to The Sphere, where it's the most state of the art, just exciting, wild visual thing. But I don't really want to just do the rock band thing. I'm not trying to sound negative. There are a lot of things about touring that are so amazing. The venues themselves when we play the historic theaters and the fans, I'm not complaining about that stuff. I think that we just want to do something that's more exciting and thrilling.

Ben: They were just playing *Waiting for Guffman* in a theater near me a few days ago, and I just went. And I think that at the end, Eugene Levy's character, after being in this community theater show that fails to make it to Broadway, he ends up in Florida performing Yiddish songs at an old folks' home, but he's happy and he's wearing a Hawaiian shirt or something. He's like, "I finally found where I belong." I think there's some profound truth in that to be like, what's the point? And I think for us, the point is being happy with what we're doing creatively, whatever it is or else why are we even doing this in the first place.

I think that's maybe a good place to stop? How are you feeling about doing more interviews for the new album?

Andrew: We're kind of getting back up into this idea of talking about ourselves and talking about our music and we're still figuring out how we want to say it. All I know is that I really want to talk about Fassbinder's *Before of a Holy Whore* at some point, but I have to figure out how to relate it to our band. I think that from my German film class at Wesleyan, the concept of *The Holy Whore* was this thing where if you enter the sphere and the industry and the machine, you're sort of whoring yourself out. But it's sort of like a glorious thing that the world needs. But then, since Wesleyan days, it seems like whoring yourself out is the norm and the standard. And Ben and I went from pretending to be mega rock stars on a tiny liberal arts campus to wanting to play living room shows and sing really sincere songs to people. And I don't know what has happened.

I think you're right. The world is trying to turn everyone into a kind of content whore.

Andrew: Yes.

In the way that the machine does, it strips all sincerity and earnestness out of that as it turns everyone into what it needs them to be to generate money for our overlords.

Andrew: Right. Yeah. People are doing a lot of work for the overlords these days.

Yes they are.

Ben: I remember before Trump got elected, there was this idea that society is steadily advancing towards a more liberal place or something.

The moral arc of history bends towards justice.

Ben: Yeah, and I mean that has never been true in history. I mean, there have been points in history when maybe that was the case, but then it was followed by fascism or something. And I feel like that's just the world that we're always going to be living in and I don't know, I would like to think that maybe there's a more open-minded brief period of time that's coming up that we'll get to enjoy for a little while.

Andrew: That's one thing I will say about our new album is I see it as fighting back against the dark forces by just realizing that, I mean, this is the thing is it sounds so cheesy. It sounds like a John Lennon song if you say it, but that love is the answer and love is indestructible and untouchable and you always have it if you want it, even though the world's going to be terrible and unjust and awful and miserable for so many people and sad and terrible. You do have that if you want it.

Some Very Good MGMT Songs (In No Real Order):

"Kids"

"Electric Feel"

"Time To Pretend"

"Congratulations"

"Weekend Wars"

"Flash Delerium"

"Love Always Remains"

"Youth"

"Pieces of What"

"Little Dark Age"

"Mother Nature"

Name

Andrew VanWyngarden and Ben Goldwasser

Vocation

musicians (MGMT)

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