Neil Halstead on revisiting your creative past

July 31, 2017 - Neil Halstead is an English musician and songwriter best known for his work in the bands Slowdive and Mojave 3. After releasing three albums and subsequently breaking up in 1995, Slowdive—including all the original members—reformed for a lengthy reunion tour in 2014. Earlier this year the band released their first new album in over twenty years. "It's a funny thing, revisiting something that you were last involved in so long ago. You want to do right by it. You don't want to end up feeling like it was something better left in the past," says Halstead. "We wanted the recording process to mirror what it had been like to play gigs together again. It had just been really nice to hang out again and reconnect musically and rekindle those friendships. Thankfully, making a record ended up just being an extension of that."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2318 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Process, Collaboration, Adversity, Anxiety.

Slowdive is in the middle of a very successful—and in some way, totally unexpected—reunion run. When a band gets back together after over twenty years to play shows that's one thing, but making a new record that is gonna be judged against your "classic" albums is another task altogether. How did you approach it?

We just went at it head-on, really. When we first talked about getting back together, we also talked about making a record. We didn't want to get back together just to play the old songs for six months and then disappear again. At the same time, we deliberately didn't look for a record label or anything. We just did it on our own. I think we figured that if it didn't go well we could just sort of pretend it never happened. We could step away quietly. That gave us a lot of freedom. We didn't feel pressured to make any specific kind of record. Nobody knew we were doing it, so we could really just enjoy the process and appreciate what it was like to be working together again. We wanted the recording process to mirror what it had been like to play gigs together again. It had just been really nice to hang out again and reconnect musically and rekindle those friendships. Thankfully, making a record ended up just being an extension of that.

It's a funny thing, revisiting something that you were last involved in so long ago. You want to do right by it. You don't want to end up feeling like it was something better left in the past. At the same time, when it feels like maybe there is something unfinished there it would be a regret not to at least try and see if there is still something there. We approached the whole thing very slowly. We took the time to familiarize ourselves with being Slowdive again and get back into that headspace. We allowed ourselves time. We didn't just magically reappear with a record.

After we finished the record, we were like, "Do we put it out ourselves? Should we look for a label?" In the end, we decided to look for a label. We felt like we couldn't really do it ourselves. Maybe we could have figured it out on our own, but our skills are not really in the organizational part of things. We needed someone to deal with all that stuff. I think we just went at this whole process pretty directly, but we allowed ourselves some space to back out at any point. I think that was important.

You've been making music in lots of different capacities since Slowdive ended. How does your process change when you suddenly find yourself in a room with these musicians you haven't worked with nearly two decades?

I mean, it's a band thing. I suppose I'm the principal songwriter in the band, but we've always operated as a band in the sense that I might bring in ideas and then it goes through the filter of the entire band. In that sense, it's really different to my work as a solo artist. It's a pretty thorough collaboration.

We decided that what we would do with this record is just spend a lot of time just playing as a band, just jamming essentially, and working on little ideas and recording them. We recorded a lot of music that we didn't use, but there would be little ideas in the music or little bits and pieces that we could then take away and work on individually. I would take stuff away and work on it on my laptop or at my own studio.

Simon will take stuff away and work on it. He works with a lot of found sounds and field recordings, always filtering different things in different ways. We'd all go away and then come back together to share whatever we had done. In some ways it was similar to how we'd always worked as a band, but I guess the technology is such now that you can literally just take what you've done in the studio, pop it on your laptop and off you go. It's a luxury in some ways. In some ways, it becomes a bit limitless. Sometimes you feel like you need to put some kind of gate on it and actually say, I'm only going to work on it in this environment or that environment. Technology allows you all these freedoms, but the psychology of it can be very weird. There's something to be said for a situation that actually requires everyone to be in one place at one time, you know?

For bands, technology can both simplify and overcomplicate things. It's really handy but it also you could be on the train making guitar loops for 5,000 hours while someone else is doing the same thing with drum sounds.

Yeah, it's true. I do like working on trains though, actually. It's like having a mobile office, where the scenery just constantly changes outside your window. It's an interesting way to work. I think that if I had to go into an office every day, I could imagine going onto a train and having that as my work environment. A train office. It's something that really works, especially when you're editing and working on music.

I did a project before Slowdive, which was called Black Hearted Brother, where I worked with two very old friends of mine. We did this round robin thing where I would start with an idea and then send it to Mark [Van Hoen], who would then work on it a little and then send it to Nick [Holton]. Then Nick would work on it and send it back to me. By the the time it got back around to me it would have become something completely different.

There'd be a germ of that original idea, but it would always have mutated by that point. That didn't happen particularly as much with Slowdive, but I liked the idea.I guess it's a control thing, where you just let go of the control as an artist and you fire it over to someone else to do their thing on it and then it comes back to you as a sort of a changed beast. It always feels healthy to explore these different ways of working, even if they don't always actually work.

The big difference in making music with Slowdive now, as opposed to 20 years ago, was just the changes in technology. We had fairly basic sequencers and samplers back then, all of which have been sort of absorbed by the computer programs that almost all musicians work with now. It was particularly weird for Nick [Chaplin], our bass player, because he hadn't been in the studio in 20 years. Oddly enough, he actually works in the computer industry, just not on the music side of it. For him, it was weird going into a studio and just seeing all of these people staring at computers. The last time he'd been in a studio, there'd been a tape machine there to record us.

There are all sorts of issues to consider when you decide to revisit this creative endeavor that you started when all of you were basically kids. How do you keep the whole thing from just becoming a big nostalgia trip for everyone? Or can you?

I think the only way you can do it is to not think about it too much, because I think if you start worrying about disappointing too many people, then you probably won't do anything. I think we were always quite selfish as a band in the sense that we made the records that we wanted to make. We didn't involve the record label in our decisions too much. We were always aware of having a small fan base that liked what we did and obviously we hoped that we wouldn't piss them off too much. I do remember when we put out our last album in 1995, *Pygmalion*, how much we confused a lot of people.

When we put the band back together in 2014, we did it quite selfishly in a way. Everyone was keen to work together again, so we thought let's just give it a go. You do worry that you're going to upset or disappoint people and you worry that people have preconceptions about the band. People have all sort of memories and life experiences associated with the old records. You don't want to fuck with that, but all you can do is your best. You play the songs the best you can and you are respectful of what it means to people and you hope that people come see you and enjoy it and that it's a good experience for them.

The early reunion gigs were amazing because they felt really joyous, just sharing that experience with a bunch of people that had either never heard the band before or had never seen the band back in the old days and had always wanted to. It was a really nice shared experience for us as a band, seeing people really getting into it. It's been a really good thing for

us as well. I think that's the barometer for us—how we're enjoying it and how much we're seeing other people enjoy it. If we're doing that, then it feels like we're doing the right thing.

As a musician or as a songwriter, do you feel like a radically different person now than you did when you made those early records?

In some ways I do and in some ways I don't. It's weird. I still connect with those songs, but you do think about them slightly differently. I can see the angst in them differently. We were 17 or 18 when we were writing those songs, so that's just your life. Angst. You don't necessarily view it from the outside. Like, I guess I can view them from the outside at this point but I can still connect with it in some way. Now that it's 20 years on, we're all different people in a way but interestingly enough, we still connect as a band in the same ways. In the way we interact with each other, there's still that sort of gang mentality that we had when we first were putting out records. But you know, we've got nine children between us now, so it's very different. It's different to play in a band when you are just into your 20s than it is to do it when you're in your 40s. Simple, practical things like finding chunks of time to work together becomes increasingly difficult. The main thing I think about now is the different way you think about time. Looking back, I think we did quite a lot in the six years we were initially together, but we had so much time to do stuff because the band was all we had. It was our only thing.

We stopped when we were all in our early twenties and at a point where we all wanted to do different things. We'd been doing the band for six years at that point and things had fallen apart to a certain extent. We were pretty empty creatively by the time we finished *Pygmalion*. We needed to move on and do other things as people, plus there were practical considerations. We weren't really making much money and we'd been dropped by a label, so that all played a part as well. I genuinely don't think anyone has any regrets that the band stopped when it did. It seemed like the right thing at the time and I still think it was. Sometimes things really need to end. When Slowdive broke up everyone went and did other things. It was actually a healthy thing. It's good to be able to recognize when it's time to stop… or when it's time to start again.

There's often such a cynicism around bands getting back together. There is the assumption that it's just a cash grab and a chance to cash in on people's nostalgia. How do you tune that out? How do you move forward creatively in the face of that?

Well, I just hope that people enjoy the new record and I hope they take it and listen to it without prejudice. I know it's hard because, well obviously we're all fans of music and sometimes having bands come back after 20 years is not such a good thing. I can see why people might have problems with it or not, but it's just one of those things, isn't it? I don't know what else we could say. It's there and if people like it, they like it. If they don't, they don't. In our case it has been done with the best intentions, but I know everyone always says that. I don't think most people try to make records with bad intentions, even if it sometimes looks that way. For me it was a chance to make music again with people that I've known for most of my life. It was a chance to revisit something that felt unfinished in some ways. As with anything, you just have to make things that feel right to you and do things the best way you can, regardless of what the world may think.

Essential Neil Halstead records:

Slowdive — *Just for a Day*
Slowdive — *Souvlaki*
Slowdive - *Pygmalion*
Slowdive - Unreleased Songs (A Collection of Demos)
Mojave 3 — *Excuses for Travellers*
Neil Halstead — *Sleeping on Roads*

Name
Neil Halstead

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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