

Perfume Genius on being honest



"I'm really bad at being busy. To be honest, I'm bad at not being busy, too."

April 7, 2017 - Perfume Genius is the project of Tacoma, Washington-based singer/songwriter, Mike Hadreas. He's released four albums: *Learning* (2010), *Put Your Back N 2 It* (2012), *Too Bright* (2014), and *No Shape* (2017). His main collaborator is his partner, Alan Wyffels. Hadreas is active on [Twitter](#), where he often jokes about wearing a giant blouse.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1897 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Anxiety](#).

What is it like being in a creative partnership with someone who's also your partner?

It's a lot. We're around each other 24 hours a day. Just relationship wise, you have to learn how to do that. He's studied music and went to school for music, which is something I didn't do. So, he hears things differently than I do.

He teaches piano, so he'll go to work doing that and then I'll go in my room and write. Then when he comes home I play him what I've made. In the beginning, I'll have mostly the mood and the spirit of it. He can hear the actual music and the structure and the chords more than I do in the moment. So, if it's good, we can kind of balance each other out.

Is there ever time, when you're working on a project, and you just need to find space?

In a way. We're very different creatively. I'm very hippie about it... I'm very positive and every idea is a good idea. He's a little more critical and thinks of the details and the smaller parts that I'm not ready to worry about quite yet. That can be frustrating sometimes.

Sometimes I'm really protective of something that I know is going to turn into something really good, but you maybe can't hear it at the place it's at. I won't show him until it's at that better place.

We keep very different schedules. He's a morning person. I'm a night person. Even though we're around each other 24 hours a day on tour, when we're at home, he goes to bed at 10 and I'm up until four in the morning. Likewise in the morning, he has five hours. That's how we get our alone time.

I used to think I needed dramatic isolation to work, and I do, but it can be in spurts. It doesn't have to be a big long chunk of time. I'm able to do it when he's at work and then when he comes home turn it off. I just turn off my brain.

As your music gets more popular, have you wanted to change the way you're writing or your subject matter?

Those are all kinds of things I think about more before or after, but somehow during the writing process it gets shaken off a little bit. It definitely doesn't feel so much like personal therapy anymore. I'm just thinking about all the people that have written to me or that I've talked to after shows. I keep them all in mind a lot more when I'm writing than I did before. Especially with *[No Shape]*. It's less stories and things about my past. It's more immediate and things I'm feeling now, but I write them in a way that I think will be helpful, not just to me.

I freak out about the pressure sometimes, but when I'm actually writing I can use it as fuel to step it up. I think as things ramped up with Perfume Genius, I felt like I needed to to amp up how I wrote and what I thought I was capable of making.

Do you have any tricks or rituals for when you feel the pressure and you maybe get a creative block?

Just realizing that the block's part of it. There's always a week or two, or even a full month, where I'm convinced I'll never write again, that everything was a fluke before. Or I'm writing, and I can't tell if it's inspired or shitty, but I don't really freak out like I used to. I know that it's just part of eventually figuring it out. It used to make me panic, but now I know it's just what happens.

I'll begin writing what I think everybody wants or what I think the natural progression should be. I think too mathematically about what will be successful. You know? Then, somehow, it switches. Especially with *[Too Bright]*. I originally thought I was going to make it more pop, like soulful pop songs. They were okay, but they almost sounded like anyone could've written them. I could have given them to someone else and it would've been just as good. I didn't feel like I wanted to release music that other people could sing. Then I made something that was definitely way less commercial and that felt more inspired. With this album *[No Shape]*, I was writing more pop music and thinking very much about trying to write something catchy. But it still felt like there was a lot of integrity. Especially the lyrics, which were not cheesy. To me.

What's it like performing such personal songs?

It's different now. The show used to feel more like I was being watched. Now it feels like I share things. So, now, I feel like I'm looking out at the audience, and I'm seeing a lot more. It feels more like a group than it used to. A lot of that was just because I was really anxious. It's not like I'm robotic now, it's just more... I don't know what the right word is. It's just more like everybody's all together.

When you're writing something, and it's not working, are you okay with abandoning it? Or do you find it hard to let go of something you've created?

No. I mean, the way that I do things, I make something every day. Maybe some of them end up staying fragments. I don't go back and try to tidy them up or make them into a fully formed thing. So there are definitely things that have good ideas in them, but maybe aren't good enough to flesh out.

With this album, I had 40 little things I'd made. Some of them were only 20-seconds long and then some of them were full songs that I didn't end up putting on the album. Whether or not they're better or worse than the other one, the spirit has to be right.

You're a songwriter, but a big part of what you do is the visual look of the album covers and the press photos. When you're writing a song, do you have a vision of what it will look like?

I definitely have little visual ideas in my head. I'm mostly obsessed with the mood when I'm writing the song. The mood is always really heavy and that's usually visual, too. I always think of writing a soundtrack in a weird way.

Sometimes I can be wrong. Sometimes I write the album and then I have to figure out what the themes are. After the fact, I realize that I've repeated certain words like 50 times. Like I said, "body" in every single song... I don't know until I check.

To be honest, sometimes I have no idea how I do everything. I just let myself do it.

How do you define a successful song versus an unsuccessful song?

It's tricky. I can tell when I'm trying too hard. Or when it's something that I want to be vs who I am. I was worried about that with some of the songs [on the new album]. I felt like I was trying on different voices and styles. I didn't want it to seem costume-y. Sometimes I'll write things and I can tell it's an easy shock. It may be effective, but it's the easy way to get a reaction or to get the message across. Which is not really what I want to do and usually, if it's the easy way, then a lot of other people have also done it.

Is it useful to live with the person you make music with to quickly bounce things off them?

Yes, that's for sure. He can pick up on that really quick because he knows me really well. He knows exactly what I want my music to do. He knows when I'm pushing or reaching or when it doesn't sound like me. I can get so excited by something just because it's different or something I've never done. He can tell when I shouldn't have even done it. That's not always the most fun thing to hear, but it's super valuable. It's not like he's mean about it, he just doesn't lie.

When you wrote the song, "Alan," did you write that as a surprise? Or was he in on the composition process?

I didn't tell him I was going to name it after him. It's kind of weird because we're around each other all the time and he hears everything, in every stage of it. It's not like this gift or something. It feels just as much like his song, too. It's about us, you know? I honestly felt weird naming it after just him because it's about me, too.

I think he listened to it very critically at first. Not in a mean way, he just was very... He had his head down and was nodding along listening to it. I wrote that song in between recording sessions. I wanted to write a last song because it didn't feel like the album had one. So he knew when I played him that, that that's what I was trying to do. But then, in the morning when he woke up, I think he listened to it and had a more emotional reaction to it. I don't know how to explain it.

We're just around each other so much it's hard to separate the music... We used to almost get in fights about it, because he would come home from work and we'd be laughing or something and having a good time, then I would say, "Hey, I can play you what I made today?" And it would be this really fucking dark twisted thing. He would almost get upset. He'd be like, "Well, what? Are you lying to me? Are you okay?" Like, "Why are you writing this kind of song?"

When you're writing music as therapy, is it one of the things where because you're able to put the emotion into the song, you almost exercise it from your body?

It actually just leaves. That's why I don't feel sad when I'm performing. It feels freeing for the first time. Even when I'm talking about things that did not feel free or do not feel cozy, I still feel free. I'm just the kind of person, where as long as I feel different, I feel better. Even if it's worse. As long as it's extreme and not my default, then I'm into it.

Also, I just feel like I'm good at it. I feel good at talking about those things and writing the songs. I feel proud. So that tempers it, too. If I write a song that's just about the message, it ends up being corny. You know? I've learned that if it's honest, it will end up connecting.

songs you can rely on to fully change your mood by Perfume Genius:

"Song to the siren" this mortal coil
"Générique" Miles Davis
"mir stanke le" Bulgarian women's choir
"The host of seraphim" dead can dance
"Troy" Sinead O'Connor

Name
Mike Hadreas

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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