On collaboration

Musicians Kim Gordon and Bill Nace discuss working together in Body/Head, the pros and cons of making improvisational music, and what makes a good collaborator.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1672 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Process, Inspiration.

You've made several records as Body/Head. Do you find that your way of working together, or the nature of your collaboration, has evolved since you first started?

Bill Nace: I think it's changed in the sense that we've changed in some kind of organic way, but not in a way I can think of where we've pointedly said, "Let's change this" or "Let's do this differently." It's still like, get in the room, plug in, and then find where the music is.

Kim Gordon: I think that's true. We played together more often when we recorded that first record. We'd done some tours together and that forced us to figure out a dynamic. Now we don't play as often because we no longer live in the same place. Still, the collaboration and the way we work feels like it's grown deeper somehow. I hate to use that word, deeper, but I guess I just feel like we have more trust now. So much depends on that.

Bill: When I say, "Find the music" it's more about being open to things continuing to change. What happened when you played the night before might not necessarily happen the next day. You just have to be open to where you're being lead.

When you're making that is ostensibly experimental, improvisational music, but also trying to record it and document it for a record, how does that process work? Do you record everything while you're in the studio together and then go back and search for the best, most interesting parts?

Kim: We record a few hours of music over a couple of days, and then go away and listen to it—maybe for a few weeks, even—and try to figure out what sounds are the most interesting. You want things to feel fresh, so maybe you come back knowing there are certain things you want to work on and shape a little bit, but you're still open to the idea that things can change and it would turn into something else entirely.

The kind of music you make together kind of begs to be experienced in a live setting. Seeing you play is a much different experience than hearing it on a record. Are the recordings trying, in some way, to replicate the spirit of how you play live, or is it another beast entirely?

Bill: I think that you have to be open to *not* replicating what it is like live. We are not trying to do that. I feel like it has to be treated like two different things. A couple years ago we did a few live records that we put out that year. And I do like that—a live document—and maybe it sounds good, or even if it sounds not great but the show just has a good vibe to it. I love records like that, but I think if you're in the studio, at least for me, I try not to even think about that. There's such an energy exchange with an audience that you're just not going to get in the studio, and I think if you're looking for that, you're going to be let down. The record is meant to be a different entry point.

Kim: Yeah, the two things are very different. In the studio, I almost feel like I'm cutting into something. Not to be corny, but it does feel like I'm sculpting something, or cutting into space. I'm imagining reels of that two-inch tape, and just cutting through it in some way—that's the image I have in my head. Maybe that just has to do with the studio we record in and that space. Also, recording is different in that you don't have the same adrenaline thing happening that you do when playing live. You can focus that energy in other ways, though. It's still about not thinking too much and trusting that there's going to be some good stuff. There is something very exciting about recording. I think it's just a different kind of excitement.

The two of you live on separate coasts now. Does that mean that the time that you have together has become more valuable?

Kim: Yeah, I think so. Maybe it requires a little more planning now, but playing with Bill is fun. One of the most fun things I get to do is play music with Bill. Because it is so spontaneous and a little unpredictable, playing with him feels like it's more than just doing another gig or something.

I've seen Body/Head play live in a variety of contexts. Obviously there is a huge audience of people seeking out noisy, improvisational, experimental music, but I've often seen you play for audiences who maybe didn't know what they were about to see, or for audiences that might not normally seek out this kind of music. What is that experience like, playing for an unsuspecting audience?

Bill: Most audiences have been super open in my experience.

Kim: Yeah.

Bill: I mean, I've certainly read some super mean shit online…

Kim: I don't read that stuff.

Bill: I know, you should never read online comments. I fucked up and read a couple. I wanted to make a shirt of all the negative comments on this one YouTube clip, but maybe it's better to just ignore it. I do think there are certain signifiers to rock songs that people come to expect, especially if you are using guitars. Maybe some Sonic Youth fans come and expect a certain kind of thing—and there are these certain signifiers with the sound of Kim's voice or her guitar sounds—but hopefully they also come with a willingness to just go with it and enjoy where it goes.

Kim: Yeah, people have been pretty open. I don't think I've ever heard anyone yell out "Sonic Youth!" at one of our shows, which is kind of good, you know?

Kim, you have a long history of collaboration with all sorts of different people, both in music and in visual art. For you, what makes for a good collaboration? I'm guessing it would have been easy for you to go off and make an official Kim Gordon solo record, but that doesn't seem to be of interest to you.

Kim: I mean, I am maybe sort of doing that now, but it was never a priority. I didn't have a burning need. It wasn't like I was saving up all of these ideas for when I could finally do my own thing. It's never been like that. These days I don't really play music with a lot of people, mostly because I'm doing more visual art stuff. I like playing with Bill, and that has a lot to do with the fact that we have a shared sensibility. Sometimes I do weird performance art stuff with my friend Jutta Koether, but that is totally different. That feels more like a one-act play.

I'm actually not one of those people who feels like I need to constantly be collaborating on something or improvising with a lot of random people. Sometimes these things just come at you out of nowhere. I played with this really amazing cellist, Leila Bordreuil, and it was something that someone else just sort of threw together. It was great. Bill, how would you answer that question? What makes a good collaborator?

Bill: A good collaborator is someone who is generous but is also not afraid to push back and make themselves known. A good collaboration is fluid. It's fine if someone else is taking the lead and you're just framing what they're doing, and then it switches and they're doing the same for you. Or maybe the collaboration is a full-on battle and you're just pushing at each other the whole time. It's about allowing for that dynamic to change if it needs to.

It's not about showing off, or getting into this thing that I think happens a lot in improvisation where people feel the need to do *everything*, to pull out every little trick. I've been in situations like that. It kinda sucks because it's not about the music. It just feels like you're being talked at. For me it's about letting the music lead you and remembering that that is the most important thing. That, to me, is the idea.

Kim: You almost have to let the music be the third person in the room. There is the relationship between the two of you, but then there is the music that happens… which is almost like this third party.

You mentioned earlier that rock music typically has these certain signifiers, as well as certain narrative tropes, that people can easily recognize. In some ways those signifiers can be crutches. Going out on stage in front of an audience and improvising—working without a net, as it were—can actually be harder in some ways.

Bill: Right, but I don't mean it as a purist thing either. I think improvised music totally has its signifiers, too.

Kim: Yeah, totally.

Bill: It can feel very rote and kind of like a genre all its own. I think we're trying, as best we can, to work in our own language and not feel like we're having to go through these specific motions in order to be seen in a certain way.

Kim: Even improvised or spontaneous things can be really boring. You just want to be as free as you can be, open to letting it go where it wants to go. I think that's true for any kind of art.

Essential Body/Head:

Body/Head (EP) (January 8, 2013)

Coming Apart (September 10, 2013)

The Show Is Over (EP) (November 4, 2014)

No Waves (November 11, 2016)

The Switch (July 13, 2018)

Name
Kim Gordon and Bill Nace

Vocation
Musicians