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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 6587 words.

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Matt Berninger and Phoebe Bridgers on how they write what they write

The singers and songwriters discuss what goes into their lyrics, what doesn't, and why everything means everything all the time.

Matt, I've spoken to Carin, your wife and collaborator, about writing lyrics. The process felt really intertwined, where each person lets go of ego and forgets who did what.

Matt: Carin speaks really well about writing, and she writes very differently than I do. Writing is a personal process, and it's hard to write with someone, because people's tools for getting at the writing, or getting into writing, or their pace and all that, is so different. She observes the way I write, and I observe the way she writes. Sometimes it's hard to observe the way you, yourself write, and so, sometimes, I learn how I write from her talking about how she observes me write.

Phoebe, what do your words start out like?

Phoebe: It's usually a sad tweet or something, almost like something that I think of, or some detail in my life that I write down. I'm like, "I should use that." Then I write around it when I sit down. I'm a really slow, deliberate writer. I don't like having finished a song and being like, "It doesn't feel right." Then I'll just trash it. I like having nothing in front of me—so it's all possibility.

It'll be writing in chunks, and if the next chunk isn't very good then I'll delete it and try to write something else instead of writing around it. I'll have one thing to say and then by the time I've written a whole song—which sometimes is six months of chipping away at it every day—the little piece that I started with is the worst lyric in the song. I just had to trick myself into starting. Once it's finished, and there are little ways to improve, I'll have pages and pages of draft one and then draft two and then draft two next to draft three... then I can't stop writing it.

Do you feel like that, Matt? It's almost like a weird brain bug where I already learned how to write words to this melody and rhythm and rhyme map; it was hard to start and now I can't stop, and all my thoughts are getting filtered through it.

Matt: Yeah, it's like you have to find the first lily pad, and you can't just go across the river and know how you're going to get there; you just have to step out onto the first lily pad that pops up and you're like, "Okay there might be a song," and then you're in the middle of the river and you start to have to jump forward and get across that thing and you don't want to go back, so it's like the first domino. You don't know where the first domino's going to be but you just have to get started.

It's a tweet or it's a thought, or it's a title of a book, and then you write that down and that's the

domino. And it starts to go in all directions. It's not a domino in a straight line, it just starts to go out slowly and, after a while, once it starts going, things start attaching to that thread. It's not always at all what you thought. It, maybe, has nothing to do with that first domino. By the time it's done, the first domino's possibly gone, and it's something else completely.

Do either of you hold onto things that don't fit into a song? Maybe you keep a scrapbook of lines that you come back to, an archive of lost phrases or words or things like that?

Phoebe: I have ones from when I was a teenager that I still haven't found a way to use and it's a great feeling when you finally find a way. But a lot of time they're an aside. They're throwaway lines that helped get the song started. I think that's just from getting better at writing, and not just clinging to, "I had that one idea, now I have to use it." But, every once in a while, the magical feeling happens where you're writing something and then you're like, "Oh, maybe this is finally the opportunity to use that one thing, or one line."

Matt: Phoebe, "Punisher," the word "punisher," what a great word. You've talked about that song being about Elliot Smith. It seems that it's about a lot of things, but Elliot Smith is a connective tissue in it. Do you remember what the first domino of "Punisher" was, and when did you think, "That's going to be the name of my album?" Was it a late song? An early song?

Phoebe: It was a late song, I think I wrote it exactly a year ago because your phone tells you when you took pictures, and I took a picture of the mic stand that I made for myself that was a million books including *Toxic Parents* and then a tarot book and then kale chips or whatever and then a mic on top of it. It was just so ridiculous.

So I think I wrote it a year ago, which was pretty late for the record, and I remember wanting to write a song about that feeling of obsession. On my first record, I have a song about feeling like I'm a serial killer ["Killer"], and I remember when I learned what a punisher was, I was like, "Oh god, oh god, oh god, I have done that. That is me." Which is feeling like you know somebody that you do not know and feeling entitled to somebody's time; it's definitely about tons of people, people I've come into contact with on either side of it. I remember feeling actively like, "I don't want love songs to dominate this record, I want more complicated feelings on it."

Matt: Well, it seems like a love song, too. I mean, almost all the songs seem like love songs. I think any good song is about love, even a metal song, even a Slough Feg song or something. If it's a good song, it's usually about love or fear.

To your point, Matt: People often have discussions about "meaning" in Sufjan Stevens songs: "Is this song about Jesus or is it about him loving someone else?" There are entire analytical threads about that, and the answer is always "yes."

Matt: Right. The answer is always "yes." Sufjan Stevens and Jesus are the same to me, meaning all the things that influence Sufjan and everything that influenced Jesus are probably the same things: fear and love, you know?

Phoebe: Recently, I forget what way I was talking shit on religion, but I was, and Conor Oberst started to tear up and be like, "Jesus just loved everybody and he was fucking killed for it." He's the biggest atheist on the planet, so that was interesting to me. I was like, "Oh my god. I just walked into some deep, psychological thing..." I mean, it is literally the definition of martyrdom.

Matt: Although he did preach that he was the son of god, right? He did eventually say that, or at least people said he said it. How did he say that? That happens to real people. There's about 25 celebrities that are saying that right now and there are people who enable it. When you have followers, you start to believe it a little bit. I do think that might have happened to Jesus in his 20s; he got a little bit crazy with everybody being sycophantic around him. It's kind of funny to think of it that way, of all the punishers that were around him. It changed him.

Phoebe: He drank the punisher Kool-Aid.

You both have such specificity in your lyrics—colorful, personal, human details. That said, people could still read things in an ambiguous way, like, this song's about love, or this song's about god, or this song's about a dream. In general, do you like talking about your lyrics, and nailing down that meaning, or do you prefer to leave it open-ended and not let people know what you were thinking when you wrote it?

Phoebe: I love talking about lyrics because I feel like people beat around the bush with it, whereas when I talk to other musicians, I'm like, "What's that about?" It's fascinating to me because I just want to hear the way people answer that question.

This is catapulting into a different question for Matt, but I feel like people think I write poetry, but I actually write literally exactly what's happening in a way that sounds poetic. I have a lyric on "Garden Song" that's like, "The doctor put her hands over my liver and told me my resentment's getting smaller." I just went to a nutritionist in Los Angeles who literally was like, "Oh, I sense that you're less resentful." So I just said what was happening and people are like, "Oh my God, what planet are you on that you made that up?"

I'm thinking here of "Pink Rabbits" and so many little details in National songs... all these little things

that I'm always curious about. Conor, for example, is closing his eyes and meditating and projecting somewhere else, but I can only write from my perspective. Matt, do you actively write from your perspective?

Matt: Yes, I think I'm always writing from my perspective. I am often trying to get out of my perspective and into someone else's, but that's still my perspective through my image of them. I've worked on a couple of things that were writing for other voices.

When I know I'm singing something, that's a whole other level of expression of the writing. It's like the lyrics and what you write on a page, what is down, is a blueprint at most, a sketch at most. So I never think of songwriting as poetry, even though I know that they use some similar tools—poetry's like ice skating, where songwriting is just flopping in the mud and splashing around. I'm not good at prose or poetry like that. The medium is so much gooier and looser; free associative things are where I'm comfortable, not in the precise crafting of stuff.

I think it's always me writing about me. Even when I'm trying to think about how Elliot Smith would have felt, or this woman in the film *I Am Easy to Find* that I knew was going to be personified via Alicia Vikander, or, "Another voice is going to be singing this, and it's supposed to be her mother's thoughts."

While writing for *I Am Easy to Find*, Carin and I were also working on a *Cyrano de Bergerac* musical, which is all these characters; we were writing all those things, almost at the same time I was writing this record I'm about to put out, *Serpentine Prison*, and they all overlap. I was constantly going in and out of different tasks as a craftsman, moving the narrative along in a stage play, and then on a film that didn't need the same kind of narrative, and just knowing that it was going to be a very different thing than a National record.

I did have to try to go out further into branches of trying to get inside of, "What does it feel like to be a young woman, or a little girl?" I have an 11-year-old daughter, I have a mom, I have sisters, I have all those things and they're all a part of me anyway. So much of the fabric of my identity is my own mother or my daughter, or Carin, so I was able to at least try to get in there, not so much like, "I bet they might say this," but what do I say if I were in their mind? What would I say to them from their own mouth to me?

You go into weird places in your brain and words come out of that, and then the rest is craft.

Phoebe, when you're writing, can you imagine working with someone at that level Matt and Carin do, or has your craft been more just doing it on your own? Do you have any outside eyes, like an editor?

Phoebe: I love co-writing and I definitely have editors. *Punisher* is full of editors. I feel like Conor's job to me is exactly as an editor because I have other band members, and my friend, Christian Lee Hutson, and Marshall Vore. I'll start ideas with them, or bounce stuff off of them; I feel like they know how to write me now.

Like you said earlier, Matt, about Carin explaining to you how you write and then being like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what I do," that's my experience with Marshall and Christian. They'll have a melody and they'll be like, "This sounds like you. This sounds like something that you made up. I think I stole this from you." I'll be like, "I'll steal back from you."

Then Conor is at the end of that, or at least that's how we worked on this record after being in [Better Oblivion Community Center] together. At the end of that, I'll play an entire song and be like, "This line is corny and this line is corny." And he's like, "Well how about this and this?" Or my favorite thing that he does is, "Well you talked about this the other day, why don't you say that in this song?" Basically making goals for me. Seeing it without me seeing it is so handy.

Matt: Carin's a writer and an editor. She started out more as an editor with me and then I was just like, "I love that, that's great, can I just use that?" And then I started to cherry-pick her editing for her and I'm like, "I know it's not there, but what do you think would work?" Finally I was like, "Just give me a line." I wanted to pull her into *The National*... It's lonely being the author of all the words.

Bringing in Carin made me such a better writer and also allowed me to write better because I knew that I could just say Carin wrote that. I could hide—we could hide—behind each other. She was able to give me lines that I might not have put in there because she knew she wasn't going to sing it, you know? I surprised myself by using some things I may not have written.

Phoebe: That's such a funny take, because I am never like, "Can I say that? Is it too honest?" I feel like finding the honesty for things that feel really uncomfortably honest is great, but sometimes I feel like my only fear with that is being corny, or it's like shock value. Like, I hate sometimes when people use "fuck" as if it's this crazy thing, like, "Yeah... fuck!" I get so conscious of that, but I wonder with you, are you like, "Is this going to hurt someone's feelings? Is this too silly?" Or what are your fears with music?

Matt: Honestly, I think I avoid hurting people's feelings too much. I think sometimes I couch it in a little too gilded of a lily. I think I sometimes put a cool filter on it when I shouldn't. Here's a line that had no filter. You have a line in "I See You": "I hate your mom." You have a bunch of lines like that, but to write a lyric, "I hate your mom," it's so good, it's just so vernacular, it's just, "I hate your fucking mom." And of course, aren't you worried that that person's mom's going to find out? It's

great, because for a minute you hated her and she probably needed to hear that anyway.

Phoebe: That's actually one of the only ones I even worried about where I was like, "We wrote this together, me and Marshall, so we can hide behind each other." I was like: "Your mom is going to think this is about her, even though she probably won't read this and she voted for Donald Trump so it's fine." But I was like, "Marshall, if your mom is sad, I don't want to make your mom sad, because she's a working-class lady from Idaho, and she is not the battle I need to pick." Even though we got in one fight... It's reflective of myself and kind of self-deprecating, where it's like, "I don't hate her, I just feel very strong emotions in the moment and then I in retrospect regret what I said."

Matt: It's a real risk, and I can't pay attention to any writers unless they're really risking something, because I'm not learning anything about them or about me, or anything, if it doesn't feel like it has blood in it. I don't want to pay attention to writers that make you feel like you're eating something that was in the freezer and it wasn't just killed; its heart wasn't beating when you recorded it, it tastes a little stale. Your stuff always tastes like the blood is still warm. The lyrics feel like, "Oh that was real, she gave that to us before it was polished."

Phoebe: Well, that's great. I feel the reason that I love your writing, and something that I am constantly trying to steal from, is, "Would you say it out loud?" It doesn't matter. It rhymes, of course, so sometimes lyrics sound corny when you say them. I hate having to do that in interviews when you're like, "Da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da." It sounds so much cooler when you sing it; but The National, and your solo record, it's like you say things that are super conversation[al] and heartbreaking and you have no idea what they mean, like, "Carried in the arms of cheerleaders." I'm like, "What?" And like, "Why does that make me so sad?"

Matt: That actually happened to me.

Phoebe: Did it really?

Matt: No. [laughs] I was never carried in the arms of cheerleaders! I watched other guys getting carried in those arms but... I was decent at baseball for a little while, but no. That's the thing, you create versions of yourself, both good ones and bad ones. You go back in time or into the future and you create heroic images of yourself. You create hero images of yourself in the future and sometimes you can actually manifest those things.

I believe in manifesting the magical dream that you have for yourself. I don't know how to play the guitar yet, but I'm still a rock star, because I didn't want to learn how to play guitar because it scared me and I had a traumatic experience with a piano recital and so I just don't do the things I don't want to do and I do the things I do want to do obsessively.

Phoebe: In ADHD, it's called "unpreferred tasks," which I love. So it's like doing an email interview for me is an unpreferred task. I'm just surrounded by unpreferred tasks.

I'm the same way, where I do things that I love really, really hard and there isn't even a second thought about it being work—it's like more amazing adrenaline. The work is the traveling, and whatever, but even that I'll do because I love what I do, but I'm surrounded by a half-built vacuum cleaner and sheet music and all this stuff that I would just rather not do and I think following what you actually love without the second thought is great, without being lazy. I've written 15 songs with the same three chords and like you said, I like not having to be like the muso guys that I know.

You said this to me once where you were like, "The Dessners are always like, 'Why do you pick the most boring chord progression?'" I want the freedom to be able to see that chord progression and say, "But it sounds good and it's my favorite." I don't need a mathematical reason as to why it was my favorite. Just naturally following what is fun and not building vacuum cleaners is, I think, the way that I'll always be.

Matt: Yeah, and whenever I'm like, "This feels hard," well, it wasn't that way in the beginning. It's only in the past five or 10 years I actually just started to go, "Wait, if it feels hard and you're stressed and you don't want to do it, then you're doing it wrong and there's something wrong about it." We have fans and commitments to partners' fans and crews and labels and everything, so you do have responsibility as a business person. And that's work. That said, if the creative part, the part where you're just making something out of nothing, where you don't know what it's for, but you know it's going to be public and going to be helpful at least in some weird way for you, if that part becomes hard, then it's awful.

You both have teams. You're making art, you're making music, but at the end of the day, it does also become a job, and everyone has those days where they don't want to go to their job, even if your job is the best job in the world.

Matt: I mean Phoebe, you're a rock star, right? I'm a rock star. Can you believe that?

Phoebe: No, it's wild.

Matt: Even just acknowledging it, you know?

Phoebe: It's crazy. I think finding the balance between a guilt complex, which I don't think is valuable to anybody, and just being grateful... I'm just so grateful. Also, my sound guy is the sweetest dude on the planet and literally sleeps a fraction of the amount that I sleep. On the Boygenius tour, he mixed three

sets in a row and never slept a wink. My version of taking that sort of work is like: "A lot of people on the crew don't understand what it's like to have someone in Ohio text me and be like, 'The National's playing tonight, can you get me on the list?' I'm not even in Ohio."

Matt: I know, but so many people are trying to get to you, and that is tiring.

Phoebe: I think that we are in a special little circumstance of "What the fuck." I've had people try to get to you from me, or be like, "Hey, will you send my demo to so-and-so?" Wait, do you have Roadside Records?

Matt: What do you mean?

Phoebe: It's this thing where you're in the van or the bus, and someone would give you a demo and you're like, "I'm going to sign them to Roadside Records." And you throw it out the window from the van.

Matt: Oh my god, that's good. There's so many little band phrases that bands share with each other, stuff like that. I remember I learned "hot-bagging" it from Feist.

Phoebe: Hot-bagging it.

Matt: Okay, you can't shit on the buses, unless...

Phoebe: Oh yeah, yeah, I know.

Matt: ...unless the bus has what's known as "a grinder."

Phoebe: The only thing worse than a bus you can't shit on is a bus you can shit on.

Matt: So hot-bagging is when you don't want to pull the bus over and make everyone pull over and go to a fucking gas station in the middle of fucking Germany, you just put a plastic bag in the toilet, shit in it, open a window, hot bag it out, throw it out the window. I mean, it's terrible, it's littering, but I learned that from Leslie Feist and I've only had to do it once.

Phoebe: I've never had to do it yet. I actually stole a tour manager's saying for this record. It's the first lyric in "I Know the End," where it's somewhere in Germany but I can't place it, "Man I hate this part of Texas." Bill Sullivan, who used to tour manage The Replacements and who's a friend and I see every time I'm in Minneapolis, he used to step out of the tour bus in Germany and as a riff, just every single time be like, "Fuck, I hate this part of Texas." Which I love.

Matt: So that's a little inside joke that you had with him and you work it into a song. That's great. You use everything.

Phoebe: Do you have song jokes where it's like, "One person will get this"?

Matt: Yeah, tons. I'm trying to think of one, if I can even think of one. That's the weird thing, and I wonder this about you, too: I cannot tell you right now what *Serpentine Prison* is about. If you asked me, "What are some lyrics from *Serpentine Prison*?" I'm like, "I have to think..." Because, at this point, it's all such a giant cotton ball of threads in all directions that I've just pulled out. It's all so connected, like a "Fake Empire" lyric or even a moment from "Mistaken for Strangers," and stuff on *Serpentine Prison*, they're all the same. Even *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *I'm Easy to Find*, it's all in the same blanket.

Brandon, you and I were talking about trains the other day. I used to think in terms of going back and forth, following a track—a thought, like a train track. I always write about train tracks. Phoebe, like with "Walking on a String," the song we did, it's like there's all these things that you're trying to get from one place to another, like I was talking about getting across this river and with a song, or with life, or with a day—"How do I get from here to the end of the day?" Then, I sort of stop thinking of, "Okay, here's this one song and it's supposed to be about this." It's all fabric in this weird three-dimensional spider web; it just goes in all these directions and so a moment from your past, a moment from a fantasy future, [a] conversation with your mom or dad as a baby, or a piece of a movie you just saw, or something in a joke with a friend of yours... They all are part of the same narrative. A song is a packaging device, just like a poem or a painting or a square on a wall is a packaging device for all those same exact ideas.

Phoebe: Yeah, it tells the truth even though you feel like you're lying. That's what I feel like. I feel like I'm lying every time I write a song, or I'm like, "I made that up." Then three years later I'm like, "I did not make that up." That's before it became true. That's the weirdest, when you write something and then later I'm like, "That's about something that happened one year after I wrote that."

Matt: I'm a much looser, more stonery and cosmic thinker than I used to be. It's just a much more durable way to think of things. I do think you can imagine yourself and your ideas into being. Like, becoming a rock star. You know, I think I saw the Thompson Twins with my sister or my dad, and I was like, "What are those people doing?" Or I saw Annie as a kid and the performance blew me away. Or, I was an altar boy, just being on stage, and thought: "Wait, you just put on a fancy outfit and everybody treats you special and I'm feeding Eucharist to the girls in my class." You just absorb these ways of, "I can just pretend I'm special," and people start to treat you like you are. But then you also have to give them something in

return—like the Eucharist or something, the belief that you’ve got something for them.

Phoebe: Oh god, I’m going to start doing that at shows and get so canceled. Just handing out the Eucharist...

Matt: We keep talking about Jesus...

Speaking of Jesus, and words that last, if you were to pick any of your own lyrics, which ones do you think will last? I realize this is a hard thing to do—but are there any ones that you’re particularly impressed that you wrote, or satisfied with yourself after going back and having to sing them over and over again?

Phoebe: Matt first.

Matt: Honestly it’d be kind of a struggle for me...There’s a bunch, there’s a ton. I mean, every song has a handful of lines I’m like, “Fuck, yes.” And then there’s a bunch that are like, “I don’t know.” It’s always a mixture. Every record’s like a weird stew, but I have learned that if I still like it up to this point, I’m probably going to like it more later.

In terms of specific things, there’s one: It’s not even my lyric, and I keep thinking it was Carin’s lyric, but it’s not even hers. It’s the simplest thing. It’s one line in “Baby, We’ll Be Fine”: “All we have to do is be brave and be kind.” I was like, “Carin, that’s your line,” and she’s like, “No, I stole that from John Berryman or something, or Robert Lowell, ‘Skunk Hour.’” And then we found out it was from the speech that somebody just gave as a commencement speech and they said that, “Just be brave, be kind.” But so many people have said it in different ways and so I don’t even know who wrote that. It was written by a bunch of people. It was E.L. Doctorow who said, “All you have to do is be brave and be kind” in his commencement speech.

I was going to say David Foster Wallace.

Matt: [laughs] That’s my point. It doesn’t matter who says it.

Phoebe: It would be hilarious coming from David Foster Wallace... I love “Easy to keep so quiet, everybody loves a quiet child.” I’m like, literally kill me.

Matt: I like my lyrics, I like them all, even the ones I’m embarrassed by, I’m like, “I like I have embarrassing lyrics.” There’s some I don’t like. There’s some songs I don’t like to do, like “Available,” “Cardinal Song.” Some of them just suck. I don’t like the attitude of those. I don’t like the person I was who wrote it. I don’t like what I was saying about life in that one. I was a dick and “Available” is a mean song and when I sing it I feel mean and it was real.

Phoebe: Weirdly, I feel like sometimes with articulate people—like David Foster Wallace—sometimes you’re articulate and it doesn’t mean you’re right. I think people can confuse a beautiful sentence for a true sentence sometimes and I think, yeah, it can feel weird and dirty to put something out that you don’t believe.

Matt: Yeah, and often in song, what we’re doing, we put up not really what we believe, the opposite, we often present ourselves as the thing I know is wrong, and I’m not going to do this in real life, and I’m not like this in real life, but I kind of want to do it, and I deserve it I think, and I’m at least going to do it on stage. There’s so many songs I do terrible things in because it’s so cathartic. It’s like I get to write a Martin Scorsese movie about myself and play myself in this moment, in this song right now, and that’s really cathartic, so then I go home to my real life and I’m more relaxed and don’t do that.

Phoebe: Yeah, you get it out.

Matt: It’s like your song, “Halloween.”

Phoebe: Totally. I do not want to do that ever, or be that ever. That is a very dark version of myself and you let yourself go there in the songs, you’re like, “Look, I monetized it, I’m creating something.” Where it feels dirty and weird to have intrusive thoughts over and over that you didn’t make anything out of.

Matt: Let me ask you about “Halloween.” *Punisher* is full of songs that you just keep going back and they keep opening up. It’s like a garden you keep going back to and there’s other things that are blooming that you didn’t notice the last time you were there. “Halloween” is one of those. All of them are like that, but I feel it in this one in particular, not only the theme of the song—about how you can be anything, you can change who you are tomorrow; you can wake up tomorrow, quit your job, apply for a program, find a different job, go buy a fishing rod, read a book, you can literally change yourself. You can start tomorrow. You can start right now. And, sometimes you have to put on a fake version of yourself, this thing that you want to be, first. You have to fake into it and then end at that thing. It’s like this thing I told my brother Tom, in his movie he made: “Lean into the things that make you like yourself.”

I love “Halloween” on that level, and there’s one line in here, “They killed a fan down by the stadium, was only visiting but they beat him to death.” Right? Tucked into the middle of a song about just trying to teach somebody like, “Come on, just come out of your funk, or you can do anything you want.” And there’s that and I don’t know what that’s referring to, and I don’t know if I want to know what that’s referring to, but it’s just like this olive in the rest of this martini that when you get to it, you’re

like, "What's that?"

Phoebe: Yeah, weirdly...

Matt: I don't want to know.

Phoebe: Well, I'm going to tell you anyway.

Matt: Okay, ruin it for me.

Phoebe: To make it meta, I feel like when you say, "Lean towards the things that make you like yourself," I feel that that's something I like about myself: being able to articulate how I hate myself to other people in a way that they relate to.

Matt: That's it, that's everything you've been doing.

Phoebe: That's it. So "Halloween" is totally about that. And then that line, this is a perfect example of Conor helping me, because I was on this rant about what that song meant, and it went through five different versions and I had this big thesis about it or whatever and how weird it is that people get stuck and stagnant and sad, fucked-up relationships, when you can literally just quit your job and move to Oregon if you want, tomorrow, and nobody does it, and what people do for love and sacrifice and whatever, and he was like, "Well you're obsessed with that Dodger Stadium murder." A Giants fan was killed by a bunch of Dodger fans at Dodger Stadium years ago and I remember hearing about it as a kid and being like, "What the fuck." A serial killer's one thing, whatever, but someone being in the heat of the moment so excited about fucking baseball that they beat someone to death...

Matt: I wasn't sure what that was about, but it reminded me of something that I've never written about: The Who concert in Cincinnati in 1979 or '80. My best friend's older brother went and I remember my friend calling, I was eight or nine, and I went fishing with this kid, and his mom called my mom and said, "Hey, I don't know if you've seen..." Everybody was watching the news, and there was this tragedy, we found out 11 people were trampled to death trying to just get into the seats to The Who concert at Cincinnati Coliseum. And Paul Weincamp, my buddy Perry's older brother, was not home yet. There were no cell phones, so the neighborhood was up until midnight or 1:00, until Paul's car came down the road and pulled into their house, and I remember thinking, "That's rock and roll? That's what rock and roll is?"

Phoebe: That's so fucked.

Matt: He went to a rock and roll concert and 11 kids died and he came home and he made it. Paul had Elvis Costello records. He was the cool guy with the basement bedroom. I can remember just trying to recreate Paul's bedroom... Those fucked-up things, you're like, "Wait, fucking 11 kids died just trying to go see The Who?" It's just those little haunting images... They're always in your head, they're always part of that cotton ball or that spider web and it's always really accessible. So when you're writing "Halloween," you manage to come back to this thing that you found traumatic, the idea of a bunch of baseball fans killing another baseball fan over baseball, and you put it into a song, and now we're talking about it.

Phoebe: Everything means everything all the time. I feel like I don't know what songs mean until 15 interviews in or reading my own Genius lyrics. There's a song on the first record, "Smoke Signals," where people are like, "Clearly, pelicans are an ancient symbol of death and this, this, and this." I'm like, "Yeah." I convinced myself that I knew that. I'm like, "Yeah, totally, in retrospect it was absolutely about that." When in reality, it was just... I love that about music, that you talk to a fan and they say what your song means and you're like, "Yes, that's very much what it means," instead of what I always say that it means.

Matt: Because it does now.

Meaning is always shifting. Everything is connected. It's a giant quilt, whose patterns change constantly. It's a hot bag of words.

Matt: [laughs] You put a plastic bag in the toilet and let it all out and make something of it later.

Phoebe: I feel like I'm trying to be grateful for this time because I probably would be hot-bagging right now somewhere in Germany if it wasn't [for] quarantine. [laughs] That's what I have to look forward to, that's the life I signed up for, which I love. But yeah, everything has a hot bag, in the end.

Matt Berninger and Phoebe Bridgers songs mentioned in this conversation:

Phoebe Bridgers, "Punisher"

Phoebe Bridgers, "Killer"

Phoebe Bridgers, "Garden Song"

The National, "Pink Rabbits"

The National, "I Am Easy To Find"

Phoebe Bridgers, "I See You"

The National, "Mr. November"

Phoebe Bridgers, "I Know The End"

Matt Berninger, "Serpentine Prison"

The National, "Fake Empire"

The National, "Mistaken For Strangers"

Matt Berninger, "Walking on a String"

The National, "Baby, We'll Be Fine"

The National, "Rylan"

The National "Available"

The National, "Cardinal Song"

Phoebe Bridgers, "Halloween"

Phoebe Bridgers, "Smoke Signals"

Matt mentioned Phoebe's song "Kyoto" at one point, too, but it was edited out.

Name

Matt Berninger and Phoebe Bridgers

Vocation

Singers, Musicians, Songwriters

Fact

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