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On keeping things interesting

Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker of Low discuss what it means to radicalize your own creative process, the challenges of making a living as a working musician, and the value of always keeping the ball rolling.

After the success of *Double Negative*, it seems like you've been on an endless tour.

Mimi: We've decided we don't go out for longer than three weeks at a time because we go crazy.

Alan: We do a lot of two-week runs.

Mimi: Yeah, two, two and a half weeks. We've also had five European trips this year, which is a record for us, I think. A lot more festivals than we've ever played before.

Were you surprised by the rapturous reception to *Double Negative*?

Mimi: A little bit, yeah. I mean, we knew it was unique.

Alan: It was unique.

Mimi: And that it was special.

Alan: And that it was a challenge. When we were finishing it, we were pretty excited about it. This really was a long process and we were looking for something different. There was a lot of, "Is this actually going to work?" And then when it finally started to work, it was like, "Okay. Great! Now, will anyone like it?" We were really happy with it, but the whole time there was definitely a feeling of, "Wow! This is obviously not very commercial. It's not going to be very easy for people to digest"...I don't know.

Mimi: I would say we were pleasantly surprised by the reaction, for sure.

Alan: Oh, with the reaction? Yeah. It was definitely a surprise. We thought, "Okay, well there will probably be some reviewers who will get it and see that we are trying to push some stuff here, but also probably a lot of folks who might not." We knew it was a risk.

Mimi: We had it done in the spring and there was talk about putting it out right away, but it really felt like cool weather music...

Alan: Fall sounds.

Mimi: So we decided to hold off and then you never really know what is going to happen. What is the political environment going to be like by then, for example...

Alan: Perfect!

Mimi: Yeah it was perfect, so the waiting worked out to our advantage... the political landscape had become even more terrifying by then, so the record made even more sense.

Alan: I was worried that someone else would come along and make a record in our genre that was pushing the same boundaries so we were like, "Quick, let's get this thing out because I know it's fresh now and it might not be in another six months."

Bands often say things like, "This time we did everything differently," but it's rare that it actually seems to be true. Bands that are over two decades into their career aren't typically expected to make a radical left turn—or reinvent themselves successfully. *Double Negative* feels that way. It feels truly radical.

Mimi: I mean, it kind of was a radical thing.

Alan: It was always in the back of our head to try this kind of record.

Mimi: On *Ones and Sixes* we had kind of dabbled in it, kind of gone down this road a little bit, but there was that feeling that we could take it even further.

Alan: With every record we make you go in kind of prepared, but if you also go in with an open mind and push yourself, you will end up surprising yourself... and it's always better. We worked with a really powerful, talented producer and he was willing to go there with us. That was the key. Let's try something really different and actually mean it. I think that is important. Like you said, people will say, "We really changed things for this record," and then it will still be exactly the same. For sure there were times when you start questioning, "Is this sound too rude? Is this too crazy?"

Mimi: There were a couple of times where we we all made each other a little crazy, both us and the producer.

Alan: We found out where it was "too far" and then...

Mimi: And then we'd always come back from that edge. Well, sometimes.

Alan: Sometimes we did. But it was an interesting experiment to see how far we could push the sounds and the songs until they almost weren't songs anymore, and then we could reel it back in.

For bands who are no longer considered "new"—who have been doing this as a career for a long time—it often becomes a complicated juggling act between trying to continue to tour and make a living while also having some semblance of a normal life. Do you find that it's gotten easier over time, being able to have a real life and a family but also to continue to make records and tour and make a living?

Mimi: In some ways it's easier.

Alan: Well, only because you can look back and go, "I got through that."

Mimi: It *is* easier, I think.

Alan: It's always throwing in new angles. It is always new levels of, "Okay, how do I balance this? How do I balance that? How do we keep moving forward without necessarily totally deviating from who we are?" It's a constant thing on your mind, but the longer you do it you are always gaining new layers of perspective.

Mimi: At this point, *not* doing the band would be more of a terrifying adjustment because... What the hell would we do? The kids are older now, so it's easier on that front since they're almost self-sufficient. Not quite, but almost. So now it is more about just having to figure out how to deal with each other and... can we grow up? [laughs]

Alan: We think a lot about whether or not there's something we should be doing better in order to invest for the future. I don't know, I always assume that each album is my last one.

Mimi: Yeah, that's kind of always the assumption. I think it keeps you from taking things for granted.

Alan: Like, this might be it guys, better make it count!

It's very strange to think about—I remember interviewing you for a magazine when your first child was just a baby. You were talking about making room in the touring van for a carseat.

Alan: That happens, I guess. We all get older. It all worked out.

Mimi: That kind of bumbling... well, I wouldn't say "bumbling" is quite the right word, it wasn't quite bumbling, but it was...

Alan: Ignorant? We just didn't know what we were doing, we just did it.

Mimi: Naive. Just, "Whoa, I guess this is the way you do this, I guess you just bring the kids along and you figure it out along the way." And we did.

Are you both perpetual music makers? Do you have a habitual creative practice even when you are not touring or gearing up to make a record?

Alan: Not a specific one, but it is always there. I play a lot. I practice every day, mostly because when I was a teenager at some point I just decided that was what I did, and that has been sort of my lifeline. Everything else about me is chaos and impossible organization, so I really cling to that. You can even call it a curse. It is one of the curses of being sort of professional and creative and also relying on

your creativity to make a living—creativity is kind of always on. You don't shut it out and say, "Okay, well done for the day," and then go home and completely think about something different. It's *always* in the back of your mind. You are always thinking, "Well, maybe I could play a little guitar and maybe work on that one song I have been trying to figure out." Or you are like, "Oh geez, I told that guy I would send him a couple of songs, so now I better do it." There is definitely always a cycle, but for better or worse you try to twist it a little bit.

Making a living from your creative work is complicated. It can make you risk averse. If you've created this thing that people like, you don't wanna screw it up... but you also don't wanna do the same thing over and over.

Mimi: Maybe also because you are not necessarily doing it out of just the passion you had when you first started. Now it's a job. You don't want it to feel like just a job.

Alan: Yeah, it creeps in and kind of takes the pleasure out of it sometimes. If you're thinking about a deadline or thinking, "I've got to keep moving on this," pretty soon your mind isn't enjoying the idea of making music or creating. It is just, "I'm going to hurry and do it because I'm behind on scheduling."

Mimi: But for us it's not that we're catering to anybody. We've been lucky that we have not had to.

Alan: There is less pressure because we haven't had big hits to live up to.

Mimi: Yeah, we haven't had even a single hit to live up to so...[laughs]

Alan: If you can still sell those 20,000 copies. That's all we have to do to keep a job.

It is hard to underestimate how different the landscape of music-making is now from when your band started, or just how different the touring landscape was back in the early '90s. The fact that you were able to organically grow a fan base that would continue to follow you, that seems like a luxury that a lot of bands don't have now.

Mimi: It's pretty amazing.

Alan: For us, I think it happened pretty innocently—slowly building and always maintaining, never any big jumps. It gives us room to take risks and it allowed us to do what we wanted.

I think it's cool that you've always remained in Duluth. You never had to move.

Mimi: We never had to move. I mean maybe we *should* have, but we never really felt that pressure.

Alan: No, it just never made sense.

Mimi: We're horribly frugal. But also, what would we do—sell our little piddly house for nothing and then move somewhere and pay three times as much just to live? We have this house and family in Duluth. There is history.

Alan: Sometimes I wonder if maybe we lived in New York, if it would open a few doors, give us more access for doing film score work or other things... but who knows?

Mimi: A lot of that is right place, right time... and we are never in the right place.

I know that figuring out how to play the songs on *Double Negative* in a live setting was a challenge. After so much touring, has the experience of playing this material changed for you?

Alan: Maybe not tons, but we have definitely adjusted. We are still, even now, trying to find confidence. We know *this* song and *this* song and *this* song work. This one doesn't totally work, but then it turns really good at the end. We have a little more of a handle on how to present it from essentially a year ago. It is still a surprise to us.

You have such a giant catalog of music at this point. Twelve records.

Mimi: Yeah. You'd think we would vary our sets more.

Alan: It's a very romantic idea—every night we could play a different set list. It would be cool. We've battled with that a little bit over the years. Still, I think we work better when we are like, "Is this working? Yeah, it kind of is. Okay let's do it again tonight, but we can do that better. Okay this is good now, so now I am done with this song. Let's try *this* one now..." You find things that work, especially when you're doing bigger shows. That is so valuable. I will see bands every once in a while, like bigger bands, and I'm just fascinated. How do they put their show together with that trajectory, that arc? It is so much to hang on to. You could lose all 8,000 of these people here if it takes a wrong turn. There are bands that can really do that right and when I see it, I am just in awe. If we find a section that works, man, we will latch onto it—in a healthy way—and keep using it.

This cycle of touring will wind down soon. Do you have a sense of what you will do next? What kind of record you want to make after this one? Or do you tend to think that way?

Mimi: Sometimes we do.

Alan: Yeah, sometimes we will get done with the one and start thinking about the next. When we were mixing the last one, we were already half-talking about what we were going to do next and even started working on some pieces. We've dabbled in a couple directions with some things since making this last record, some pipe organs, some more stripped-down things. Obviously the way we play live, something about that might be interesting to plan. As far as the next record and where we go next, this last record really opened up the palette for us. So, do we keep expanding on that? Do we just focus on one section of that new palette and try to find even more detail there? Do we run in a completely different direction? Like doing something acoustic or a house record or something.

You've been in this band for a long time now. Are you surprised to still be doing this?

Mimi: Oh sure. Yeah. I mean, it's ridiculous. [laughs]

Alan: Sometimes. Many times over the years we've stopped to ask ourselves, "We are still doing this, right?"

Mimi: Like, all right, we've got to get our crap together and get out on tour again, pack our bags and go through all that again...

Do you feel like you've accomplished your goals?

Mimi: Yeah. The goal was to see how long it would last, honestly.

Alan: You try your best, that's all. I don't know if it is a cultural thing based on where we come from, but you just don't let yourself admit that you are getting your hopes up too much.

Mimi: That is very Minnesota.

Alan: Yeah, don't get too cocky.

Mimi: I remember us in the very beginning writing a few songs and then going to Kramer's studio and recording them and then having to come home and write a couple more, so we'd have enough to make a record. At the time it was like, "Do we actually have another song in us? I don't know. Maybe we've said everything we need to say."

Alan: I remember that. I remember being like, "We've got to write some more songs so we can keep our sanity, so we can feel like there is something moving here." Once the ball starts rolling, even very slowly, you want to keep it going.

Low's 12 studio albums:

I Could Live in Hope - (Vernon Yard, 1994)

Long Division - (Vernon Yard, 1995)

The Curtain Hits the Cast - (Vernon Yard, 1996)

Secret Name - (Kranky, 1999)

Things We Lost in the Fire - (Kranky, 2001)

Trust - (Kranky, 2002)

The Great Destroyer - (Sub Pop, 2005)

Drums and Guns - (Sub Pop, 2007)

C'mon - (Sub Pop, 2011)

The Invisible Way - (Sub Pop, 2013)

Ones and Sixes - (Sub Pop, 2015)

Double Negative - (Sub Pop, 2018)

Name
Low

Vocation
Musicians

Fact



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