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As told to J. Bennett, 2920 words.

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On taking ego out of your process

Musician Adam Vallely (The Armed) on keeping an open mind, avoiding fetishization, taking big swings even if you miss, and the value of anonymity.

Do you have any sort of coping mechanism for the enforced downtime brought on by the pandemic?

Lifting weights and dieting. The idea of *ULTRAPOD* is supposed to be this shiny commodity, and we wanted to couple that with the best physical presentation of the show as possible. So all of us started working with a nutritionist and training with this idea that we were doing, depending on the person, 12 to 16 week boot camps before our show started. Then the pandemic happened, and now we're all on week 55 of real intense repositioning of ourselves and of our physical bodies.

But I think it's ended up being kind of a blessing because the natural thing for some people is to drink a little bit more or eat more because you're trying to find any sort of creature comfort in the never-ending doldrums of this. And you don't blame them—it's not a judgement at all. I think the coincidence that we already happened to be going into this radically different mode ended up being a blessing in disguise for most of us because I think it's definitely keeping us sane.

How would you describe your artistic philosophy, both personally and within the Armed?

I think it's really important, especially as you get older, to keep an open mind and to understand what happens with you and your tastes with time—because time collapses upon itself. When you're 28, time passes differently and will be registered as such than when you're 16 or when you're 32. You've got to keep in touch with being open to and accepting change.

The Armed really is a very large collaboration of many, many people, and there's a lot of different philosophies within there. But I think what links everyone is the urge to move the needle in some capacity. I think the Armed is our outlet, not for financial success—I can tell you that for a fact—and not to nail critic scores or view counts. It's more of trying to make a big impact and move the needle for the art form that we're participating in.

We all think of the Armed as a broader thing than a band. It's a holistic art project. But it is centered around music that comes out via a "band" that comes out as albums. I think within that framework, there's so much stagnation and so many rules and stuff. It's very different than the fine art world and it's a lot smaller. There's a lot more binary standards. A certain amount of compression on a bus of drum mics is considered good, and something beyond that is considered bad. Lars Ulrich makes a snare drum sound like a basketball in an empty arena. It is funny, but it's funny also that it's considered inherently wrong.

That's not what the visual art world is. That's not what the film world is. We're a bunch of weirdo art and noise people at the base of all of this. If we have to be considered a band, we'd rather be the band that takes a big swing and sort of misses, but maybe someone who's more talented than us hears something that appeals to them or a concept clicks and they can take it further.

I never hear people say that. Plenty of bands or artists say their goal is to inspire people, but you never hear them say that they themselves might be missing the mark, and it's the miss itself that might inspire.

I think we're okay with that being our thing. Taking the biggest swings possible, it's the thing that we all share—that focus on novelty, originality of concept and sacrificing one's own ego. Challenging those binary measurements of value that exist so, so much in the music world. Challenging authorship itself,

challenging authenticity. If our album was sponsored by Budweiser and it's exactly the same, would that be any worse? I'm not saying it is or isn't. I'm genuinely asking. I think that those are the types of challenges that you don't normally get from a lot of music.

I think the concepts of subversion are a lot more, without trying to sound too much like a dick, just childish. Like an upside down cross in 2021—my mom isn't going to bat an eye at that. I think that's what *ULTRAPOP* is—the realization of those things. It's not that those things are bad. We like a lot of heavy music and stuff. It's just the idea that maybe you're not as edgy as you think you are.

In 2021, when you can pull up the entirety of art history and every film and every song instantly—that crust punk on the street has the same iPhone as I do—it's like, "What is pop? What isn't pop?" This is all kind of pop now. I can go to Target and get a shirt with a dagger and a skull on it. The thing about the Armed has just been trying to exercise some level of self-awareness within a genre where none of it exists elsewhere.

I want to go back to what you said about taking your ego out of the process. The Armed maintained anonymity for a long time—how much of that was playfulness or just messing with people versus being practitioners of ego death?

It was far more the latter in the beginning, and then a very ironic thing happened. When we're not listing members and we're taking band photos, and then those photos change, people uncover a conspiracy in the music. But the problem is that it was never really supposed to be a mystery. Rather, I guess it was supposed to be a mystery, but it's not a mystery that's supposed to be solved, if that makes any sense.

Meaning you didn't want the focus to be on the mystery...

We're not a band wearing masks or something. We needed band photos. We're not trying to do something to say that we're not even human or that there's that type of performative element to it—even though that's fine and cool for other products. That just didn't jive with what this band has been from the beginning.

The thing that's funny is that we started changing things up in the way we record. Some songs are written by basically one person and other songs are written by, with zero exaggeration, 14 people. There's no ego. It's whatever serves that process. Obviously, we're not going on tour with that many people. So the live band is different than the band that records, which is different than the band that's represented in photos sometimes. It comes down to the logistics of having a massive open collaboration like this.

It was very much on purpose to make it anonymous so that no one would give a shit because, even when our music was conceptually far more primitive, we were still trying to divorce ourselves from that concept of authorship. Again, we're all a bunch of nerdy art kids. This is stuff that's happening elsewhere. I'm not saying this an original concept. I'm just saying it's something that seemed to be cool to us and also fit with the fact that it was this larger project.

But then it became a conspiracy of sorts.

Right. Half the shit that's out there, that people talk about, isn't really from us even. It's people genuinely misunderstanding shit or being confused that perhaps more than one person in the band is named Daniel. I don't know. It apparently is an incredibly uncommon name, which is weird and counter to my experience. [*laughs*] But a lot of this shit has fueled itself from people talking about it. And we've kind of lived with and embraced that obfuscation.

But I do want to clear up that it's a lot less confrontational than people think it is. Sometimes we do interviews and people expect us to be real dicks. I know we're weird. I do so many of these because I can talk best, I guess. [Guitarist] Dan Greene is incredible, but he's not house trained for this kind of thing—and he'll be the first to admit that over an awkward email. But it's not confrontational just to fuck with people. I think we're just trying to create a universe that's different than what people are expecting when you hear of a band.

If you've seen Nine Inch Nails and they have different members every time, it's like, "Oh, that's fine because it's Trent's project." But the Armed isn't one person's project. It's a bigger thing than that. You wouldn't ask Nikki Sixx, like, "Hey, man—I've been doing some research, and I don't think that's your real name." It's funny that that's such a thing to us, but I also get it. I'm not pretending to not understand where people are coming from. I'm just saying I think the explanation is far simpler. We're just trying to say that maybe you don't need to give a shit about it.

Speaking of Dan Greene, he did manage to do an interview recently, and in it he indicated that the Armed are anti-subgenre. That seems obvious from listening to your music, but what does that mean to you?

Yeah, we're anti- the concept of subgenre—not that we don't like things within subgenres, but just the natural extension of that, which Dan explains a million times better. It's a fetish. You fetishize something that's supposed to be a subversion of some sort, and then all of a sudden these techniques are no longer subversion. They're just commonplace effects, and that's uninteresting to us. It's also what stagnates art.

Yeah, he said subgenre was "almost the antithesis of vitality in art." I never thought of it that way before, but it makes sense.

Yeah. Remember that Terrorizer album, *World Downfall*? It rips, right? It also came out like 32 years ago or whatever. And now there's 100,000 bands that sound like that. I'm not shitting on grindcore—I'm just saying that the things people end up fetishizing are bizarre. Why is everyone trying to tour like Black Flag? Why is everyone defining authenticity by that bar? Shit changes over time and I think it just points to some serious old head kind of thinking if you're not understanding that.

If subgenres are the antithesis of vitality in art, what do you see as an example of vitality?

Ooh... well, I'm going to answer this about vitality, but I'm not using vitality as a binary for good and bad, if you understand what I'm saying. I think hip-hop is a fantastic example. It's hard because there's so much saturation of that genre—trends hit fast and then they get saturated. But I feel like, as soon as that saturation happens, people move on to the next thing. I'm not saying that all Soundcloud rap is fantastic, but a lot of shit that was happening with some of that stuff was pretty genuinely subversive and genuinely novel in a way that guitar-based rock music just is not, percentage-wise, on a greater scale.

There's far more rules that are being subscribed to, and some of that is happening because of the limitations in which it's created or the limitations of the artists themselves and their understanding of melody and the tools they're using. You're locked in with Fruity Loops and all this shit. That's really not that different than the limitations that, for example, Black Flag had in terms of what their understanding of their instruments was.

Look at the visual aesthetic of punk: It's not just that people thought that Xerox-copied shit looked cool. It's that it's what was available. Now there's so many more techniques and the Xerox copy becomes a fetishization of a byproduct of a limitation. Again, I really want to stress that this isn't bad. It just isn't vital. I think that it's really important to try to keep that needle moving, and part of that is not locking yourself down to anything. That gets easier as you mature as an artist—not giving a shit about what anyone thinks and just going for it.

I think that's one of the hardest things for not just artists, but people in general, to put into practice.

Absolutely. When you're 19, you might care about some band that you'll never think of again, but at the time, they play all the local shows and they're the coolest guys. They got in a crazy fight once and a lot of people showed up. The bass player drank 30 beers once before they played. It's like you let that shit weigh on you when you're young because you want to be cool to your peers. Then, as you put out more and more of your own stuff... not everyone does this, but we just stopped giving a shit about what anyone thinks. We hope people like it, for sure, because it's so much more effective. But our mission is very singular in that we're just trying to move the needle and keep the shit going so that, if we don't nail it, maybe someone else will and the shit just doesn't stop.

That's a very altruistic attitude.

Well, I think you've got to have a childlike mindset in a way—never forgetting the excitement. Don't become the guy with the crossed arms. Never forget what it felt like, when you were younger, to hear a song that just completely blows you away. Hearing "4th Grade Dropout" by the Dillinger Escape Plan as a teenager, it's like I literally didn't understand. I have some musical chops, but it was so different I was like, "Are they just making this up?" That confusion can be so magical.

I think confusion as a medium within art is so underutilized because it's what leads to these fucking moments where something can click and it's just this feeling that's unlike anything else you ever have. I think that it's also great because it grounds people. There's so much gatekeeping, and then these things of subversion become tradition. The first row is for singing. The second row is where the pit opens up. Then the third row is the old guys with the crossed arms. You put confusion into that, and all of a sudden everyone is at ground zero. There's something beautiful about that.

Albums that came out when I was 10 and when I was 15—that seems like two lifetimes apart. You've really got to just keep that in mind and really check yourself as an artist if you're someone who's privileged enough that anyone listens to you and you can exercise a vision of some sort. I think you owe it to people, even if you're not making a million dollars off of it, to just give them something new.

Let's talk about not making money: You guys have made a point of releasing all your music for free. Early on, someone in the band pointed out that younger people don't put monetary value on music anyway, so you should maintain quality control by releasing it for free in the file format of your choice.

Now that's changed because of streaming, but in the beginning it was very much a thing of respecting our audience and knowing how people consume it. At the time, the music industry's response to what was happening was unbelievably flubbed. So we decided that we were going to recognize what people were already doing and not assign moral good or badness to it. We could just acknowledge it and fucking control how they hear it because they might as well hear it well. When you do that, people respond and buy shirts. And they buy songs. They willingly buy shit that's free, which is crazy to me. That's so cool and it's very nice.

The next thing you know—well, years later—people completely outside of the band are crowdsourcing funds via PayPal and buying you billboards in Times Square. I think by respecting our audience from the beginning, it's paid off.

The Armed is big on collaboration. As you pointed out, sometimes there are 14 people involved in the writing of a song. In addition to the various members you've had in and out the band, your records have special guests. What do you see as the value of collaboration?

Well, let's start with the obvious—diversity of thought. The idea that a few heads are better than one. The negative of that is committee think, groupthink, the corporate kind of mentality where everyone needs to be appeased. Everyone needs to service their own ego. I don't know why or how, but we seem to have an internal understanding within the band that no one gives a fuck. I'm sure on a personal level, if you didn't get a single riff on an album, maybe that person would be bummed. But everyone is willing to make that sacrifice. There's a very good understanding of what the mission is, and the mission is to make the best music.

Adam Vallely Recommends:

Christopher Wiley - *Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*

Stephen King - *If It Bleeds*

Tony Visconti - *The Autobiography: Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*

Louis Theroux - *The Call of the Weird*

The Voidz - *Virtue*


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