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December 21, 2020 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3015 words.

Tags: Music, Photography, Inspiration, Process, Collaboration, Creative anxiety.

On creating in private

Musician and photographer Felix K Walworth on balancing collaboration with solitude, experiencing the power of community, and keeping your process and art sacred.

You released your first album in four years during quarantine. Had you considered pushing it back until after things returned to normal? Or was the project done, and you were ready for the world to hear it?

I take a long time with my music. Typically, by the time I'm finished with a record, I'm already itching to get it out into the world. I've spent years fiddling with the EQ and I'm just like, "Get this out of my control, and give it some ceremony, finally."

In the past, I may have been a little bit more strategic about being like, "Okay, this is a horrible year to release music. I can't tour to promote the record. I'm releasing it at the end of the year, which people typically already don't do because they like to be on year-end lists and things. And it's an election year, and it's a particularly fraught and insane election year." So, strategy-wise, horrible, right? In the past I probably would have avoided that kind of thing and thought, "Let's push this to Spring 2021" for the sake of the optics and engagement and such.

But you can probably already sense by the tone of my voice, and the words that I'm choosing right now, that I increasingly just don't give a fuck about those things. I've been doing this for a long time. And, I'm a small fry. If 60,000 people listen to my record versus 10,000 people, it's all small. They're small numbers of people. So frankly, it was more important to me to get the record out when it was done than to worry about timing.



(dancers)



(stairs)

The thing is, against all logic, the timing is actually quite good. People need music now. Your music is human and personal and moving. I imagine it being helpful to people. It has been for me.

First, thanks for saying that. Second, yeah, the times in my life when music has been most meaningful to me have been in moments of uncertainty and upheaval. Personal crisis. I write a lot about these things, whether or not they're large moments of crisis or slow, grinding crises over a long period. That's something that I've been able to glean from art in general. So, yeah, I don't feel as though it's worthless to release music in times like this. It's not just about the attention span of the people who are engaging with it. In some way you might say my strategy is perfect here, right? Because it's like, everyone is at their most fucked up. They need a balm.

Speaking of human connection, have you missed touring? And, have you thought of these new songs at all in terms of playing them on a stage?

Before the pandemic I was practicing with a small band to try to create live arrangements for most of the songs on the record. But all of that was after the album was mixed and sent away. So, essentially, these songs have always existed just as the recordings. I feel unprepared to play most of them solo. I've done a few Instagram Live things. Those are fun, but they feel like covers of the songs. Or like sessions or

something. They don't breathe the necessary life. Of course, the live sessions don't breathe the other necessary life of being with a person in a room, playing music. So, yeah, the songs are not really imagined as live touring songs, so it doesn't feel like they're not going to be able to fully exist once this record comes out.

For the past eight years, nine years, touring has been my job job. I've been heavily on the road. Some years, six or seven months out of the year. That gave me a really complicated relationship to touring. Like, a pretty addictive one, for lack of a better way of understanding it. It gave me the feeling of being unsettled wherever I was. You know, unsettled on a stranger's floor in Utah, and also unsettled in my bed at home.

Having a break from that—and I really do think of this pandemic as a break—has been great for my mental health. I've been happier, I've been more creative, I've been focusing on other aspects of my life that touring didn't let me focus on. Ways of being in my domestic space that feel permanent or structured. Ways of building towards something, perhaps. I'm not always on the threshold of escape, or leaving.



(photo photo)



(Noel'le)

In that sense, I don't miss touring. But also... I haven't been on tour since last August. This is a record for me. And, I miss seeing different things. I miss meeting complete strangers. I miss random acts of

kindness. There's a lot of kindness to go around these days, I feel, between people who love and trust each other and have that connection already built. But there's something to be said for someone sticking their neck out for you for no reason, who's never seen you before or met you, or anything, and doing the same for someone like that. I miss that. I wish that I could take photos of places outside of the four square blocks of my neighborhood, you know.

I do miss performing, too. But also... Recently, the year before the pandemic, I was touring a lot and I started having panic attacks. I was on tour in April of 2019, playing bass in a Lala Lala. We were opening up for Better Oblivion Community Center, so the shows were particularly big, as far as what I'm used to. This one night on stage I had this full-blown panic attack. I felt like I was going to just drop dead on the stage. There were like 2,000 people there. It was something that I was just completely unprepared for, and it continued to happen almost every night after that on this tour. It then seeped into other aspects of my life.



(kite)



(gust)

But essentially, for that year, I had multiple other tours booked, and really no time to address my mental health. So I was just sort of raw dogging reality: no medication, no therapy. Just like, full-on adrenaline and anxiety for like months. And I was just like, "I don't know if I can do this anymore. I don't know if this is sustainable for me. Something about this lifestyle that I've been practicing for

years and years has caught up with me in some way. Something is unaddressed."

So, in a way, this time off touring has been a blessing. I've been in therapy. I've got my drugs. I've been taking inventory. I've been doing a lot of excavating. I don't know that I would have if touring had continued. If the world felt like it was still going on, and I was the only one stopping, I may have had a more difficult time prioritizing myself.

You're Told Slant. It's just you. You're piloting the project. As the person who is essentially the group, do you have strategies to keep going? How do I keep yourself accountable as a solo person?

It's interesting because I do go at my own pace, and my pace is slow. But I also have a lot of shame about that. And about productivity. Sort of just inherent capitalist shame, that we all have when we're not working our hardest, I guess. And that's enough, honestly. I don't need anyone else... My own internal guilt and shame, that gets me right through it. Also, most of my close friends are songwriters, artists, people who are constantly working on things, and we don't have any structured way of sharing what we do. I used to have that in a lot of ways. And that used to be meaningful to me, to have like show and tell kind of stuff. But, I think just being in the presence so often of other people who are experimenting and writing, it helps you remember, "Oh, that's what I can be doing with my day." Instead of despairing about this or that.

You're saying the show and tell has maybe changed. Have you been able to preserve any of that in the current climate?

I still have exchanges of work with people. For music and for photography, I have a web of people. You know, we're like, "Oh, check out this. Will you tell me what you think of this song, or this mix? Or, what film stock was that?" Those things are really important. My trusted music confidants are important to me for getting mix advice, and songwriting advice. That can all be done sending things over the internet, but I miss being able to show people things in a real space.

My favorite thing is when someone bombards you with a piece of art that they're working on, because it's like, all of a sudden you're in a pressurized, obligatory space, when you thought you were just hanging out. But I like that. I mean, not exactly when someone takes the earbud out and sticks it into your ear, but being at someone's apartment and them being like, "Oh I was just working on this song, you want to check it out?" It gives people an opportunity to really pay attention to each other and really engage. Sometimes someone will send me a mix, and the WeTransfer link will expire, and then I'm too embarrassed to ask them for another one. And, the medium of text messaging is just insufficient for actually digging in. So there's something to be lost there. But I'm doing the best that I can in the circumstances.



(Molly)



(SB)

You also take photos- often of outdoor spaces, friends, people on the street. Is photography something you want to pursue in a more "professional" way? Or do you see it as something that you're doing on the side of your music, and the music is your primary creative outlet?

I feel in a lot of ways that in the last couple of years I've had to claw music back into my life in a positive way. This thing starts out as your passion, and the mechanics of the industry, the social worlds, all these sort of ancillary trivial dumb-ass things just take over and poison the well.

I've never thought I would quit music because I can't. I'm cursed, essentially. But there have been so many times where I'm like, "Why did I do this to this sacred thing?" Like, Why did I defile god?" And so I'm nervous about that with photography, because it's something I'm still learning as a practice. I'm still very much in a full-on sponge-brain world with it. It's so joyful to me, to just walk around and play. The idea of it not being like that is very deeply sad to me. I feel like, if I'm going to survive as a person, I'm going to need to be a lot more protective of the spiritual space of art.

One of the very first interviews we did on TCI was with Anohni. At the time she was taking a break from live performance and focusing on art for this very reason: She was burnt on the industry of music, but found art exciting and joyful and freeing. There was a purity to it. This was a few years ago, and I noticed that she released another song the other day. Maybe finding ways to divorce herself from the industry allowed her to return to it. I remember when I saw that, I thought, "Oh, maybe she found a way to protect it."

That's a hopeful story to hear. Right? That someone isn't just completely derailed by the exploitative system, or the weird scarcity mindset social atmosphere. And they can just make art because it can still feel good. And that's ... For me, so much of being protective of music, for myself, that's a lot what making this record was for me. It was completely alone. I feel like in my earlier music, I had more of a style, or something. I was using very similar modes, just in different configurations, and focusing on words a lot more than music. But ultimately it was a mode I was comfortable working in. I was like, "I'm comfortable doing this because I know how to do it, I feel like I'm pretty good at writing this kind of song." There was safety in it, but also, with that safety, an expectation, I think, of success. It was like, "This is what I know that I'm good at, and what I know that other people think that I'm good at."

And for this record, I was like, "Well that didn't feel good at all." Like, I made this thing. And people did like it. And yet, I still feel alienated from music. This thing that I love is like slipping further and further from me. So writing and arranging and all this stuff with these songs just felt like, "Anyone who likes my music or had expectations about my music...this is a curveball for them, stylistically." And I was just like, "I don't care. I'm having so much fun." I'm just writing like six-minute songs and shit that I would never do.



(Dan and Hilary)



(kids with ice cream)

When you were finished did it feel like a success to you?

Yes and no. I'm very, very proud of it. And not just because I'm like, "I think these songs are good." But because I still can feel the place of joy, and I just—I want to avoid words like "purity"—I felt closer to god. [Laughs] I don't want to use words like purity, but I'll use words like god. But, I felt so spiritually connected to this process. It was just such a positive force in my life, making this record. I wasn't beating myself up about it. But then again also, once all the fun stuff is done, and you're tweaking little things, one day your album sounds incredible and the next day you listen to it and you're like, "What was I thinking? It's the worst album I've ever made." It's hard to say whether, definitively, it felt like a success. Right now, I feel like it was a success. There have been times when it did not feel this way.

It also depends on how you define success. Because you were saying you felt closer to god, you felt joy. That seems successful. There's personal success, the success of completing a thing, and then there's the external success of people's reception of it, or people's response to it. I always like to think that I'm divorced from that, but I'm not. If everyone is like, "This is terrible," it's hard not to be bummed by that. But if a couple of people are like, "Oh, this is great," even if it's balanced with a few other people saying it's terrible, at least for me, I can feel successful about that. I don't need to convince

the entire world. I just want to know that it meant something to somebody else.

You're right. You want to divorce yourself, like those aspects of the process. And it's so hard. It's really so, so hard. Like, this ... I wish we had better words than "album cycle." But this album cycle, press stuff has been so—just so—bad for me. And no one has even said anything shitty about my music. I mean, usually at least there's someone out there that's like, "What the fuck's this bullshit?" Like, "Sounds like fucking Donald Duck," or something. But just having to get into that mindset again, or allowing myself to fall back into the world of, "It matters whether other people value what you've done."

Putting your work out into the world is weird: "Here, world, take this thing." Especially when people don't get the context, or they come up with their own, and it's completely wrong. People read their own biases into it. You have this thing you make, then it's out there, and suddenly it's not entirely the thing you made anymore. It is, but people project their selves onto it.

Definitely. Yeah, and I mean, there are so many questions that arise from that, right? You know, about authorship. Like, whether it's meaningful, the author's intent. Whether or not your song can really be your song anymore. Yeah, I mean, that's really hard, to release something that's often so personal, and have someone else's narrative, maybe, become the public narrative. And all you have is your private feeling of, "I'm right."

Felix K Walworth Recommends:

Succinct political quote: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Always thought this was a Max Stirner quote but it turns out it was Marx.

Best lyrics ever written: "The signifieds butt heads with the signifiers / and we all fall down slack-jawed to marvel at words / when across the sky sheet the impossible birds / in a steady illiterate movement homewards" -Joanna Newsom, "This Side Of The Blue"

Piece of advice I've found useful: *learn how to teach yourself.*

Thing I am excited about: exploring photography as a medium of self expression and play.

Video game recommendation for anarchists/socialists/artists: Disco Elysium



(fluffy plant)

Name

Felix K Walworth

Vocation

Musician, photographer

Fact

courtesy of Felix K Walworth

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