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As told to Kim Kelly, 2663 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Collaboration, Money, Mental health.

On balancing business and creativity

How do you reconcile the fact that you're a nice young man who works, who has a regular person's life, and who's also this sort of cult figure in the underground metal world?

It doesn't really feel like a thing that needs to be reconciled. Maybe it feels that way because the past two years have been so low key. But it doesn't feel like I'm ever having to be this person, and then be this person. It all feels genuine to me. Probably when I'm on tour I look a little bit more like a heshher than I do right now. But the past almost four years now, music's been full time for me, so it really just feels who I am. There's not the day job and then the night job thing anymore. So I can just be more myself all day, every day. It's a fragile thing, but it just barely keeps working until it stops.

Till the wheels fall off.

Yeah, that's right. You got to try.

When you're making records and making art, do you have that in the back of your head-I really hope people buy this? How much of that pressure comes into play?

It's definitely a tightrope that you have to walk. I'm still totally true to myself creatively; I mean, I just put out an album that's a 15 minute funeral doom song on one side and an ambient drone song on the other side that's not very "commercially successful." But of course I want people to like what I make, and I want to still be able to live off what I make, so the pressure is real. I have to indulge both sides, the true creative energy and the business, and it sucks, but it's the life that I've chosen for myself—one of the only ones I feel authentic living.

Before I started recording, you mentioned a couple of still-secret collaborations you're going to be working on this year; for a one person band, you seem to to play well with others.

That's nice to hear, because I don't feel like I do. I'm such a picky person. It's like I'm constantly self conscious about that, about myself doing anything, from composition to mixed notes, whatever. I just have so much to say about everything and I care so much about everything. It's incredibly annoying, from my perspective, but I can't help it. I'd like to think that's part of what makes my art good to people, but I don't know.

It's hard to get a sense for when things are done, which is a blessing and a curse. I find that it's easier to let go of things when I am collaborating. Because I can just make peace with anything about it that I don't consider perfect. Because it's not all on me, the other person likes it that way, and that's cool. But when it is all on me, it's like you go into the hole, you go psycho on it.

How do you deal with feedback from overly analytical or nitpicky fans?

I ignore things like that, unless it's coming from someone I trust. And usually those people don't give me that kind of advice unless I ask for it. It's like, are you just showing me this because you want me to be supportive or are you asking my opinion? But as for the Joe Schmoe's I mean, yeah. I've had comments that are like, "The vocals are just too loud on your record, this would sound great if it was remixed with

lower vocals." Those kinds of things, I'm like, "Cool. I purposefully chose to have loud vocals on this record because I like how it sounds. You don't, that's fine. But I don't know what you're trying to accomplish by voicing that opinion. It's mastered, it's done. You're holding the records."

No piece of art is ever fully done, I guess. But at a certain point, it's on wax, or it's printed. That's what you're going to get. Now that we're talking about this album in a couple months after it came out, does it feel a little better to have a little distance from it?

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, unfortunately the actual records probably won't be here for a bit, because of what's happening in the final pressing industry, but it's nice because around release time, you've written and recorded the music, you've mixed the music, you've approved the masters of the music. You've heard it so many times that you never want to hear it again. And then everyone else gets to hear it, and you get to just take a break from that and that feels good. I don't often go back and re-listen to my music; here and there, but it feels uncomfortable. People are going to say what they're going to say, and I just hope that in 10 years I still like it. That's the goal I always set for myself.

I was really nervous about *Wits End*, because of how strange it is. It is more of an EP than when I make a full length; so for me, a 12 inch is a little record, 30 minutes, whatever. I thought that a lot of people who already like my music would not be able to find a way to access appreciation for the ambient side; I blend fast and slow music, black metal and doom metal. Some people are there for the black metal, and some people are there for the doom medal, and not only is there not a single blast beat on the album, but there's not even drums on the whole B-side. I'm preparing for the fact that I think a lot of people won't get it, and having to just be okay with that, because it's the album I want to make. But I've gotten mostly positive responses. Definitely have seen people say that the second track to them is just a throwaway filler song that never drops. So I'm like, yeah, I knew you would exist, this group of people. That's okay.

That's their problem, not yours.

Yeah. You know, I think it's also weird for the metal community, because it's not uncommon for a metal artist to do some droney stuff, but it's usually harsh noise and shit like that. And I'm not really into that; my version of drone music is more classic ambient music. I listen to Brian Eno and William Basinski and shit like that. And it's very soft and airy, and I think calming sounding, and not extreme heavy metal sounding. I think I'm just as uncomfortable with it as anyone else that's listening to it, but I don't shy away from releasing things that make me feel uncomfortable, because I just wanted to do it, you know?

Do you feel like this is your pandemic record in a way?

One of them? Yeah. I did a record in 2020 that was a collab with my friend Andy, who was at Ambient Doom Record. That was what I thought was the pandemic record, and then the pandemic just kept going. So now there's two.

Oh god. Hopefully it won't be a trilogy.

I know! I think I'd be foolish to say that the pandemic hasn't influenced my creative output, but I wouldn't hold it solely responsible. *Wits End* is not specifically about the plague, but it's a real action to society's response to the pandemic, for one, just everyone lives in an echo chamber and is completely diluted, and we don't agree on what facts are anymore. And that's more what the record is about.

Reality is always the scariest shit out there, and now there's nowhere to go where everyone even agrees on what reality is.

Yeah. And I don't even necessarily want that, but I find it troubling when people don't have adequate processes for vetting information. How do you determine what's true and false? And if the way that you do that is by changing your mind in the face of new evidence and constantly updating your viewpoint to the best of your knowledge, given the facts, I think that is objectively much better than doubling down on your viewpoint in spite of new information, and just accepting what you want to believe by faith. That is the crux of the problem, in my opinion. There's a spectrum of opinions that I don't even agree with, but that I'm not bothered that people have, because there's some science behind why they think that. And then there's this whole other camp of people that's just like, I believe it because I want to, and that's impenetrable, seemingly.

It's like being really deep into the throes of organized religion.

Exactly. I was raised in evangelical Christianity from the time I was a baby, in what I would consider to be a very normal Christian house in America. When I was a young teen, I just didn't really care about it. But there wasn't some sort of grand proclamation of recanting my faith or anything. It was just like whatever. I'll go to youth group and fuck around with my friends. I don't care about what the pastor's saying. But I was always forced to go to church every Sunday, even when I didn't want to, and begged my parents to let me stay home because every time I would go, would push me further and further away. And they would say, it doesn't matter, you have to go. So by the time I was 18, I was over it.

But what happened for me then was I spent a year or so, just not caring about the faith and just living what a Christian would call a worldly life. Experimenting with things and just being me, doing me. And then I had a conversion experience as an adult, and Christianity became really real and personal to me and not my parents' religion. And I was devout for a couple of years. I studied the Bible for six months in

Germany at a school, and completely did a 180 with my whole life. Stopped playing music, changed completely as a person. And slowly throughout that time, I started to have doubts of the faith, and got really, really depressed, worse than I've ever been. And it was a really slow process, but it shattered my world view.

Christ had become my best friend and the love of my life and shaped the way that I understood literally everything about myself in the world, and to have this realization that none of that's real, is an immense loss. So, that's what made me start the project. The first album was actually still a struggling Christian. And it's where the name comes from—"Mizmor" means Psalm. So I was writing these prayers. It's all addressed to God, in the second person; You, you, you.. They're dark and sad and embittered and confused, but they were still prayers to God. And then just slowly over the course of the next decade, as I continued to process and make music about what I was thinking and feeling and how I was changing, went from Christian to struggling Christian to, I don't know what I am, to agnostic to atheist.

And so with this record, I'm talking about more of an outward experience of humanity and not all y'all, but we, as a people, this is what's happening right now. There's no eye on the record. And that's just what I find interesting and important right now. I needed to get the musical therapy of the last decade out, but I don't need to linger on that anymore. I've, for the most part, healed. So now there's just bigger things to talk about.

Do you go to therapy?

I've gone to therapy over the last couple of years a little bit. I'm not in it right now, but I really think that making music over the last decade...sometimes it sounds cheesy, but it really has been therapy and it's allowed me to process what happened for me and to get catharsis and actually healing and move on. If I were just stuck making the same, angry anti-Christian record for the rest of my life, there'd be something wrong there. I've still got lots of emotions and things to process, and I'll always carry around some remnant of that trauma, but it would be too narcissistic and self-indulgent to make another record about me and my mind and my thoughts and my feelings. I just don't want to talk about that right now.

There's entire genres of music that would disagree, I think.

Yeah. And, that's great, and it's served a purpose for me and I'll probably have to do it again sometime in my life. And I respect people that are doing that. There's no right or wrong or anything. But with this album, there was a big pivot for me; I'm talking about more of an outward experience of humanity and what's happening right now. There's no "I" on the record. I needed to get the musical therapy of the last decade out, but I don't need to linger on that anymore. I've, for the most part, healed. Now there's just bigger things to talk about.

Do you think people will get all that from listening to this record?

Yeah, I think so; I always present my records with the words, and there's a music video for the first side, too, which I think drives home some of the points of the album. At least people that think the way I do will get it. I don't think that with something as extreme as what I do that I'm really reaching people that disagree with me.

What does it feel like to go back and revisit all of those older songs and feelings when you're playing live on stage?

It feels mostly good, because I know that it brings the people that are there to see the show some amount of catharsis. And that's what it's all about. I know some artists in our world feel they're trauma mining to present their craft, digging up this painful stuff again, and it's not a good thing for them. I feel I'm in a place where I'm separated from it enough to where it doesn't affect me like that. I mean, I still feel things when I'm playing those songs and whatnot, but I feel removed from it personally a little bit when we're doing the performance. I'm more focused on performing well, and is everyone doing the thing they're supposed to do? And is it going over well? Is everyone vibing and feeling the music together? And you know, I click in every once in a while to a lyric and get impassioned over it. And it's fun. It's not fun. It's all the things. It's complicated. But at the end of the day, if people are there getting something positive out of it for themselves, that makes me feel good.

What do you hope that people take away from this record?

Oh man. I hope people take away from this record that the scientific method is important, and whatever conclusions you want to draw from that in your life, if the way that you integrate information into your world view is a scientific one, you'll be okay. And so will the rest of the world. Because you won't be making terrible decisions in your group that affect everybody.

Very metal.

A.L.N. Recommends:

Five must-haves in the studio, from a producer's perspective (in no particular order):

Fresh guitar strings

Fresh drum heads

Isolated power supplies or 9V batteries for pedals

Drum dial for proper drum tuning

Well rehearsed musicians

Name

A.L.N.

Vocation

musician, producer

Fact

Emma Ruth Rundle

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