

# On leaving space for chance and happy accidents



Musician Andrew Clinco (Drab Majesty) discusses experimenting with characters in performance, working solo, and learning to relinquish control.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3151 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Performance](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#), [Focus](#).

## **How would you describe your creative philosophy?**

I feel that you are never totally in control of the work that you make, in a music context. Maybe painting is similar, as I was a painter in college, but I like to distance myself from authorship as much as I can and try to set up parameters for magic and happy accidents and for the unexpected to happen. I think you can build the structure, you can build the foundation, but all music I love has this kind of otherworldly magic element where you just can't be like, "Oh, the person making it had a thousand percent intent on every detail here." It's never like that. There's always that other thing that happens. It's really hard to convey in words.

My philosophy for making any art is not being too precious about the end results but being more serious about the parameters by which it's made and the process by which it's made—and allowing that chance and magic to occur. This could even go for a collage you're making, an art collage or a video piece maybe. Film is one of those things that's interesting because everything is so controlled in the frame, and it's like you're hyper-manufacturing reality. I guess the magic factor happens within the acting. That's the unknown zone where anything can happen, but as far as the frame that you're viewed in, everything is there. You don't want there to be variables really, at least from my understanding of film.

But with music, something happens when you have live takes. You have harmonic interests and dissonance and concordance and all the tones and textures. They're colors. But when you put them together, there's something else that you just can't account for, and that's what my philosophy is now going forward in music making.

**This idea of distancing yourself from authorship reminds me of an interview you and I did back in 2015, when you told me that you didn't feel responsible for anything you created. Do you still feel that way?**

Yeah, totally. I think that's what led me into this process. It kind of went hand in hand with learning a very crude technique for fingerpicking and then putting it through pedals and very quickly arriving at something that I thought could possibly have some kind of longevity. I had an understanding of rhythm because I was a drummer first—and for a long time—but as far as facility on the guitar, it happened quick enough for me to not feel like I totally deserved the strides I was making on the instrument. At that point, there was a deep catharsis in playing, and there kind of always is and has been. It was at that juncture that I decided to start detaching myself from the experience so I could look at and listen to the recordings more objectively. That's when I heard something else I didn't quite believe was myself.

**That must've been a strange experience.**

It was. It still is. I listen to the old recordings, and because I work so fast, too, I don't really have a very clear memory of how I arrived at any of this stuff. I don't listen to my music all that often, but when I do, and something like eight years have passed, it really becomes almost a hundred percent objective experience. Sometimes I think it's cool, but sometimes I think it's weird and I can't relate to it. I like that about it, though. I don't want to be someone that paints and they hang all their paintings up in their house, and they see them every day, and they kind of start to hate them. I don't like revisiting work. I like moving forward and getting space from it and then looking at it later.

**This detached feeling from the music you were making is what led to you coming up with Deb Demure. You didn't feel like yourself, so you decided to be someone else. How did you develop the character?**

Oddly enough, the name Deb came from this trucker jacket I got. I got it at a thrift store, and it said something like, "Grand Rapids Trucking Conference, 10th annual," and then it said "Deb" on it. I had a bartending job at the time, and it was Halloween, and I showed up to my bar gig in the first Deb wig and some crude lipstick, and I just went as this kind of butch trucker lady. I was the character I imagined Deb to be.

I had this whole other idea of finding work shirts and returning them to the people who had them at one time, or finding out who they are, like, "Who's Ron from the auto body shop? Where are these people?" That was a side project I was doing. But I always loved the name Deb. When it came time to go back and think about how I could showcase this as something that's outside myself—this is probably about six or seven years before I started Drab—I was like, "Oh, the Deb jacket." There's something about the name I always felt connected to.

**What about Deb's persona? She's kind of a blank slate.**

That was a combination of my interests in Hollywood and public access, and there was an aesthetic there I picked up from riding the bus and seeing these interesting Hollywood people who were somewhere in between beauty and desecration. There's an element of glamor, but then there's an element of darkness or pain. These people look beautiful and really interesting, and I felt that might be a good place to start. But the early iterations of the character had too much personality. As the music kept getting more advanced, I was finding myself not relating to it even more. And eventually, I felt like I wanted to remove full features of the face, which I did with white or silver metallic makeup, and really cover the eyes, too. Because the eyes convey too much. They're too personal.

Then there was a tour where we were experimenting with this retro reflective fabric that's basically anti-paparazzi fabric. When you take a picture of it with a flash, it blurs. It makes everything around it black, and then just blurs out the whole image. We had a friend make this gown, and it was basically like wearing a shower curtain. It was the summer, it was really hot, and I probably lost 20 pounds just wearing the thing. It was a really, really bad idea, but it came out cool, and it did work from time to time if people used flash photography—it kind of erased the person in the shot.

I'm still trying to grapple with the idea of how we could perform as almost inanimate objects. That's something I'm still trying to wrap my mind around, but I like the idea of just losing features, losing identity. The paradox is, by losing identity, you assume a different identity. There's no way of totally losing identity, but that's still what I'm trying to play with.

**When you started out, you were playing in bands as a drummer. Was the transition to being the frontperson pretty smooth, or did you struggle with it at first?**

It was pretty smooth for me because I had [former Nocturnes bandmate] [Emma](#) [Ruth Rundle] to bounce ideas off of, and she was doing the same thing, essentially. She had moved from auxiliary guitarist in Red Sparowes to kind of closer upfront in Marriages, and then full-on to her solo thing. So, she kind of paved the way for possibilities in that department, and I followed suit. I owe her a lot in terms of getting confidence around my playing. Even fingerpicking the way I do is totally indebted to her and her technique. She buys these press-on nails from CVS. I'm looking at a box of them right now. They're everywhere in my house. Just glue them on and file them. They stay on for three or four days. Beyond that, she helped give me a voice and some confidence in that regard.

**How did being a drummer inform Drab?**

I was kind of tired of just playing rhythms. Melodic instruments are so fun. Drums are critical, but melodic instruments convey a lot. Because I had no reference point of how to really do a solo project, it was kind of freeing. I was able to spend a lot of time in my room doing the bedroom thing. I mean, the band is still a bedroom project, as strange as that is. That's where tunes are conceived. I miss playing drums, but I've lost all ability to do it. It's sad, dude. It's not like riding a bike. No instrument really is.

**When you're in character as Deb, do you feel you can do anything that maybe you can't do as Andrew?**

Yeah, I play the entire show. I don't think I could do that in my plain clothes. No way. Also, because it's such a delicate ballet of playing and singing and doing the pedal work, plus just the flow of the set, it needs to be pretty controlled. It's not punk music. It's not VR Sex, where there's plenty of room for freeform abandonment. With Drab, it's about 80 percent predetermined. There's a system I need to follow from the first song to the last. And then there's 20 percent play. But the whole thing is a hundred percent in the zone.

**Do you feel like someone else onstage?**

On the good shows. Yeah, for sure.

**Are you Deb when you're writing as well?**

I'd say I'm somewhere in between. It's a meditative state similar to that of playing—only when I'm writing solo, though. If I'm collaborating, there's a different kind of brain between [Drab Majesty keyboardist] Alex and I, and it's something magical, too. There's lots of elated moments. He writes fast, like I do. It's always boom, boom, boom. "Oh my god, we have a tune." So, there's that. I have those quick epiphanies when I'm working by myself, too. But the live thing is full meditation, and the writing part is somewhere in between. And I don't write in garb.

**Beyond that, do you have a strict separation of church and state? Meaning, you're Deb onstage, but when you're backstage after the show, you're Andrew again?**

Absolutely, yeah. The character is, I don't want to say "relegated," but it's only allowed to operate on stage. That's where it happens. It's kind of disturbing, I think, for some people. They're kind of shocked. They're like, "What?" But that's how I honor it without destroying the mystique. That's why I've done almost no video interviews.

**You mentioned Alex. You brought him and his character, Mona, into the band, in 2016, I think that was. How did that open things up for Drab?**

It brought more symmetry to the stage, first of all. And he knew exactly my references, my deeper musical references. He's a really adept DJ and a big music head. He used to work at KXLU for like eight years. He had a weekly show. He really understood the project from the get-go, and he and I bonded over a love of psychedelics. I did one of those deprivation float tanks for the first time with him, and it was just like I found this dude who totally understands my musical language, is respectful of my ideas, and just wanted to help in any way he could. He learned how to play keyboards, essentially, for the band. He's actually a guitarist and a very competent one, too. We're going to do more of dual guitar thing for the next record. But he was able to enhance a lot of the parts I had written with my very rudimentary style of key playing, because I'm not a good keyboardist. And we finally just started to write an album together. The next record is full 50/50.

**As a drummer, you were in bands playing other people's material, which I imagine is part of the reason you started Drab in the first place. And now you're collaborating again. Was the interim solo period necessary for you to get back to the head space of working with someone else?**

I would say yes, for sure. Coming out of art school and having an understanding of how to see a work through as the sole creator of it, I kind of enjoyed applying the same craft and technique to a cassette or this little EP release we just did, *An Object in Motion*. I mean, you know the feeling of total home brew. And I had to do that for a while. I needed to have that autonomy. I guess it was selfish, but it was necessary.

And then, the next step in collaboration I graduated into was working with a producer. That was kind a big step for me, working with Josh Eustis from Telefon Tel Aviv. But then I realized, "Oh, wow. Okay. So, now this is as good as the sum of its parts. Now, someone I trust is taking my tunes and making them sound better than I could." I had to admit that—and I was happy to. It was actually very freeing. I always thought the musicians should do everything. They should write the record, make the cover art, mix and master the record, do the videos themselves. Again, that's what I learned from Emma early on. She was super DIY with *Nocturnes*. She did pretty much everything. That made sense to me, coming from an art school background. But the next phase was actually bringing in another person and handing out more of your work, your raw material, for them to interpret.

And then, the next phase, I was working with more producers, then working with other video people that weren't me, because I did some of the videos early on. I still have a hand in most of the videos, but you just start to kind of relinquish control more and more, and it feels good. It's taken about 10 years to get to where we are now. I still don't have a full band, but that's subject to change.

**There's some ego death taking place in order for that to happen, to realize you don't need to hold everything in an iron grip.**

Yeah. And it goes back to the whole thing of setting up parameters and then letting chance and magic take over. The album is never going to sound exactly how you want it to. It's going to be something else because you are putting it in the hands of other people who are making a number of decisions beyond your total control. And I don't like backseat driving on everything when it comes to production or mixing. I like a first pass like, "How do you hear the song?" I think it's really important as someone who collaborates to be constantly moving your anchor point or changing where the bar is. Not like, "Oh, it's good enough," but being open to seeing a new angle that you might not have considered before.

**You went to the Oregon coast to write *An Object In Motion*. I think you went to Greece to write your previous album. The idea of isolating so you can focus on your work has been employed by artists forever, but why was it important for you?**

I am so ADD, and living among all my gear at my house, and then all the distractions...L.A. is just full of shit to do. I could lose a full day of work just stepping outside of my house. I like the isolation because, for one, if it's in another country and I don't speak the language, I'm not talking to many people. I'm also on another timeline or time zone. So, the phone's not blowing up. People are sleeping back home when I'm trying to work in the morning, which is fucking awesome. And also, I don't hear my own voice that much because I'm not talking to anyone. So, I like that.

The cabin on the Oregon coast had really spotty cell service. There's a town, but in town there's one restaurant, one bar, one brewery and a market, and that's it. So, you go there, and you have to work. And making the trek also sets you up for a fixed timeline. I work well under pressure. If I have to make it happen, I will. And at home, there's not much pressure. That's why I work in weird, isolated spurts at home. I can't really get into a rhythm. I kind of have to go off the grid or work really late at night. It's a bummer, to be honest.

**Drab was already going strong when you started *VR Sex*. Why did you feel the need to have another outlet at that point?**

Because I was hyper-obsessive with all the world building in Drab, and I guess I still do that a little in VR, but at least the guitar playing and the songwriting is way less precious and way more id-driven. VR's music was kind of a counterpart to the Drab stuff. I was actually doing the VR shit shortly after I started doing Drab stuff. I wanted to make gnarled, cassette punk stuff, but I didn't have anybody around that could play in that kind of band. So, I kind of shelved that stuff and then revisited it in about 2016. VR is less precious but more fun. And

it's kind of similar to what my brain sounds like on a daily basis. The Drab thing is definitely more of a conscious meditation.

#### **Andrew Clinco Recommends**

**Blood on the Moon by Chrome:** This is a record I can't stop obsessing over. I go through yearly phases with it. The album is super weird, super alien, with incredible sonics. It sounds like the whole thing is recorded through an aluminum box. It's one of the most 3-D records ever.

**Collected Poems of Jack Gilbert:** I've been reading this a bunch. Really, really good breakup material. Or if you're going through dark times, it's pretty uplifting or comforting.

**Tales from the Gimli Hospital:** This is a film that I watch all the time when I work because I have a little TV in my home studio space. It's directed by Guy Maddin, a Canadian filmmaker. All his films look like they're shot in the 1920s and '30s, but they were actually made in the '80s. It's a very strange film.

#### Name

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#### Vocation

musician

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