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April 10, 2024 -

As told to Michelle Hyun Kim, 2086 words.

Tags: Music, Identity, Process, Collaboration, Time management.

On being inspired by your environment

Musician Bolis Pupul discusses going back to your roots, trusting the time it takes to make a project, and finding collaborators who get you to be your best self.

Your new album *Letter to Yu* originated from your first trip to Hong Kong in 2018, which was part of this journey of reconnecting with your roots after your mother passed away. Were you continuously working on the music since then?

When I went to Hong Kong for the first time, I had no idea I wanted to make an album about Hong Kong. It was more important to visit my roots and figure out if there was anything that I could discover or connect with people. But when I was there, I felt inspired to make something. I was recording sounds on the street with the phone, capturing some of the things I was sensing at the time. I had my laptop with me. I had a little keyboard with me, so I could sit anywhere and make something when I was feeling inspired.

When I came back from that first trip in 2018, I had a meeting with Stephen and David [Dewaele] from Deewee, the label. I let them listen to my demos. They said, "Hey, that's very cool. I think there's really something there. Did you write any lyrics?" I told them about a letter that I had written to my mother when I was there in Hong Kong. They asked, "Can we see the letter? Can we read it?" And I said, "Yeah, but it's really personal. I'm not sure if we can share this with everybody."

Then I made a quick recording of me doing a spoken word [recitation] of the letter. We listened to it together. Then I made a few edits of the text. There were things that I thought that were not necessary to share, they were not anyone's business. I made it in a way where it was comfortable for me to express what I was feeling.

Afterwards, they suggested, "Maybe this is the blueprint for the record. Maybe you should go back a second time and make more music and dive deeper into Hong Kong and meet people and write about what you experience and translate it into your musical language." So that's what I did. I went back in 2019 and forced myself to write something every day with my keyboard. In the park, on the beach, in Starbucks, or in restaurants. I was just writing the whole time, and at the same time, taking it all in.

Can you explain the process of trying to translate this new environment into music?

Sometimes it can start from a field recording. Maybe it's the sound of the subway, and I have to figure out how to make some chords that go well underneath it. Other times, it's something that works from my subconscious. From not thinking at all. Being in the moment and not censoring yourself. Whatever you feel, try to express it in music. Sometimes it's a cerebral or tangible thing that you can grasp, but sometimes it's just being present and trying to channel the things that you feel in that moment. And what comes out, comes out. And if it's good, it's good. It's not always genius. So then you think, "Okay, let's try again tomorrow." But just doing it every day, it's a very good exercise. It's something I should do more often, even in Belgium. When I'm just at home, instead of doing a meditation in the morning, I should sit behind my keys and try to write something.

With "*Spicy Crab*" in particular, which is inspired by the Hong Kong dish, how did you take the experience of eating food and put it into a dance track?

Like I said, it's about trying to take something in and then meld it into what you're working on. The idea for "*Spicy Crab*" came right after I ate spicy crab for the first time, and I thought [the dish] had a kind of composition. You have a tender start. You can just start with the garlic pieces. When you put the crab

in your mouth for the first time, you don't put it in completely. You taste it a little bit. Then it builds up. There's a moment when the spice really kicks in, that's when I put in the bass drum.

Then there's the aftertaste. That's like the outro of the song, which stays on that same [energy], but less strong. It's like the tastiness of the peppers that still have their effect on your tongue. Because it was so flavorful, it sounded like a lot of arpeggios and a lot of melodic information. But at the same time there's one melody that can bind everything together. That's like the crab meat, the glue for the weird chords.

Did you have any main lessons or takeaways from working on this solo project, without a direct collaborator or in a band?

I'm used to making music on my own, because I've done it since I was 15 years old. But I think it's very important for me to express that Stephen and David were very involved while I was working on the record. We spent a lot of time talking about the songs that I had written, and we did a lot of listening sessions to the work in progress. They always had some valuable feedback for me, giving me new directions or suggestions like, You have to try another synth, because you've used this one before.

One of the most important things that they contributed to the record was making me aware that a song like "Completely Half" or a letter to my mom [like the title track] would interest other people. I thought it was just something that I would like, because it's about me, but it wouldn't be relevant to other people. But they were like, No, this is really important stuff that you're doing. You have to go further and you have to really be vocal about it.

That's what really gave me the courage to finish those songs. I think if I were alone, I would easily have thrown away the idea of the letter, because it was too close for comfort. But their enthusiasm and guidance were really strong. I eventually believed them. I was like, Okay, I think you are right, and I have to do it.

Yes. Collaborators who can gently push you to get out of your comfort zone.

Yes, that's very important. Having somebody that can push you over that edge and get out the best of you. Because you're not your own best trainer or teacher. It's just very helpful to have an external person. And Stephen and David are some of the best producers, who push their artists to be their best selves.

How did you think about setting aside time for yourself to make your own project?

That's something I really needed to do consciously. Otherwise I tend to have the personality to push away my own projects first. Maybe that's the reason why this album took so long. There was a momentum with Charlotte [Adigéry] that we wanted to grasp, and we felt like we needed to keep up the output at that time. I don't feel any regrets about that. I had the chance to let my songs ripen, let them grow and let time pass. So the songs also matured, in a way.

There's also a lot of songs that didn't find their place on the record. I could make a second album with the tracks that didn't make it. We had to make a decision about what could build a strong story, and it's the 11 songs that ended up being on record. It's like a football team. You don't need the best 11 players, you need to have the best team of players.

How did you decide what songs don't belong on this "team?"

Sometimes we had too many slow songs, so we would think, "Okay, we need an uptempo song now." It was about finding that balance for the record. I wanted to have an album that was happy, but sad at the same time, because that's how I feel when I'm in Hong Kong. When I'm there, I feel happy, but I feel sad. It's wonderful, but also it's very hard. There's a lot of wealth, but there's a lot of poverty. There's a lot of things that remind me of my mom, but then there's also so many things that I discovered that are new. I think that kind of battle is very strong inside of me, and it has its place on the record. Sometimes people ask me, "Sometimes it's very upbeat, but it's also very sad. How do you combine that?" But it's those extremes that I feel when I'm there.

On "Cosmic Rendezvous," you included a recording of your mom going to an astrologer. What was the process of finding the recording and then figuring out you wanted to put it on the song?

Stephen and David and I were going through all the songs, and we thought that a recording of my mom should be on the record. She needs to be vocal as well. I don't have a lot of audio recordings of my mom, but then I remembered that my sister had found a tape at home from 1995. My mom was going through difficult times then. I also had a tape for maybe one or two years in my house, ready to be digitized. But I kept on postponing it. I felt that there was something on it that I really needed to hear, but I didn't want to go into it, because I knew it would be difficult to hear her voice again.

So when I finally did it, I was like, "Okay, but what can I use?" Because it's so personal, and I didn't want to expose her. I didn't want to do anything that would feel uncomfortable for her. So I made a lot of edits, a lot of erasing back-and-forth, up until the last hours that we were in the studio. I asked my sister too, "What do you think? Is this too much? Do you think she would be okay with this?" So I think I found a balance that I'm happy with.

I think one of the most important sentences on this track is the last sentence. The astrologer is telling

her things like, "You're connected to the godly mother of the universe." And my mom was like, "Yeah, but how can you know all of this?" That's how I wanted to end it. Because that's how she was. She needed a good explanation for why things were the way they were, or some intellectual reasoning. And I really wanted that to be the punchline.

I've heard so much about your reflections on your mom and her passing, so now I'm wondering, what kind of person was your mother? How do you remember her?

Very strong, smart, sensible, big-hearted, empathetic, and supportive. She was very connected to Vietnamese Buddhism and Thich Nhat Hanh. She was interested in mindfulness when it was still alternative. She always followed her own path. She didn't get a lot of support from home, and things weren't always easy for her, but she had a very strong determination on where she wanted to go, even though she didn't always know where she was going.

She had this kind of connection with herself and her energy, her spirituality. I think it's different when you lose somebody who was very spiritual. It's easier because you know you can connect to them again. Knowing her, I feel like she's always around, taking care of things and making sure I'm alright. She's always going to be very present, in my life and my sisters' life because she prepared us so damn well. I think that's the beautiful thing about parenthood—you can't prepare a child for everything, but we can pass along the things we think are very important, or our best assets, onto them.

Bolis Pupul Recommends:

Book: Haruki Murakami - *South of the Border, West of the Sun*

Art: Check out visual artist Sarah Yu Zeebroek

Place: South of Crete to have a time out and enjoy nature and tranquility

Movie: *Triangle of Sadness* (2022)

Music: The Germans - *Spirituality*

Name

Bolis Pupul


Vocation


musician


Fact

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