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As told to Max Freedman, 2555 words.

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On letting your art guide you

Musician Dan Bejar (Destroyer) discusses the uniquely creative space of live performances, letting a band run with your musical ideas, and making your best work from not writing at all.

From what I understand, you've always been self-managed. What can you achieve creatively without a manager that might be an obstacle otherwise?

The idea of getting [a manager] just showed up too late in the game for me. No manager ever approached me until maybe 2006, when *Destroyer's Rubies* came out, because that was a buzzy record in its own indie way. But that was album seven for me, and I was maybe 33, 34 years old, which, in indie rock, made me feel like a veteran. And I knew that there were already a bunch of things I didn't want to do. It seemed strange to get a manager and give that manager money just so that I could say no to the manager all the time.

When you put it like that, it makes a lot of sense. And like you said, without a manager, you have more money, and the industry loves to pay musicians last and still not very well.

I mean, that's the short answer of it. That being said, things probably could have taken off more for the band at that point had I gotten someone on board to map out a chart to modest success. And then, when it really seemed like I would take that step, which is when *Kaputt* came out [in 2011], that was already album nine, I was almost 40, and I was set in my ways, but I know there were lots of things we could probably have taken advantage of that we didn't, or maybe things that I don't even know about that we could have done. I don't know if it was the right move or not. It's just the one that I naturally tend toward.

Given all this industry talk, I'm curious how you balance your creative ambitions with the need to make ends meet.

I don't, really. I guess a very practical answer is, you go on tour to make money and promote your record, but that makes it sound like performing on stages isn't creative, and I think it is. The older I get, the more value I put into live performance, and I'm not so hung up on the idea of the studio being where masterpieces go down.

There's this idea out there that [touring is] how bands make their money, and it's actually really hard to make money on the road. Just because you don't make any money through recorded music, because of how people consume music these days, doesn't mean that all that money is funneled to you hopping in your van and driving around for a month playing clubs. It's actually pretty tough to scrape by, especially for smaller bands. I remember it was hard for us in the early days.

Can you talk more about what playing shows does for your creativity and songwriting?

It's complicated. Normally, you work on a song, you record it, and then the band learns it and takes it on the road when the album comes out. And I'm wondering [whether], these days, that's the best way to do it. For us, it has been, because I've made a lot of these records that, for me, involve a lot of studio manipulation and collaborating with people who really like to get their hands dirty in the mix. But as I mature, I'm really starting to value playing music in real-time with people in an enclosed space.

Maybe part of that is also because I just haven't done that in the last two years, so it's starting to feel extra exotic. But as a singer, I think playing live is really important, even though I think I have a different singing voice in the studio than when I'm on stage, to the point where they don't really talk. The day that the way I sing when I'm having a really good show and the way I sing when I'm laying down the

vocals that people hear on a record [overlap]...That will be a breakthrough.

With your 2022 album *Labyrinthitis*, how much of it was recorded in person with the band, with producer John Collins, versus virtually?

Zero percent of it was recorded with more than one person in the room. It was always each person doing their own thing. For the last album, [2020's] *Have We Met*, I managed to go down to Seattle and hang out a bit before we actually had to mix the record. There was none of that this time. It was just, come up with sketches for these songs or the skeleton framework, have the band in their various corners of the earth in their little studios. We [would] just throw stuff at the songs without having heard anything that anyone else did. And then, later, John and I would try and make sense of it. The most collaborative part was the two weeks before handing in the album when I went to the little island where John lives to mix the record.

You also mentioned studio manipulation, which surprised me because, up until *Have We Met*, I felt that your music was the kind of thing that was recorded without much in the way of studio effects. I would love for you to talk more about how the studio affects your creativity.

From *Kaputt* onwards, I've been more into the idea of filmic music, even if it's still a collection of songs. John Collins really steers into that, because sound design is just something that he gets off on. It was our mandate from day one on *Have We Met*, and on *Labyrinthitis* as well in a different way, to steer hard into that and worry more about texture and space.

All these things became way more important to me than actual song arrangements. Melody became my enemy, and all I wanted was beats, bass, and sound effects. That's where my head has been at for the last few years, not that that's what the end result is, but that's always the initial germ of it. I might be coming out of that phase in honor of turning 50 this year, but that's where my head's been at.

John Collins and Dave Carswell have been among your main producers for decades now, but as you've worked with them, your music has cycled through so many different genres and sounds. Can you talk about how keeping the same close circle of collaborators helps you shapeshift or hinders your transformation?

The sound must have as much to do with them as me. I hope my songs are kind of same-y. I feel like I do one or two or three things, and...the best-case scenario is that they're distinct and I'm the person that does them. But Nick Bragg has played electric guitar [in *Destroyer*] since 2002, and I find his playing really distinct. I don't mistake anybody else for him, and John and Dave's production style, you can always tell a record that...John had a heavy hand in, or you can tell a record that Dave had a heavy hand in, like *Destroyer's* *Rubies* or [2015's] *Poison Season*, stuff that's more classic-rock-sounding, which is still the bulk of what I listen to. They have their styles, and they have things that they like and don't like.

When I first started talking with John [about *Labyrinthitis*], it was all about house music and just doing music with drums, little bits of percussion, and variations on a song suite. What we ended up with couldn't be further from that because we always seem to land in a comfort zone between where he lives and where I live. At the end of the day, we don't live in that text thread where we got really excited about making something that sounded like a Cher record.

The other thing that happened with *Labyrinthitis* is that the band became increasingly more present, and the more they sense stuff, the more the ideas morph, because [the band is] more on this album than they have been in the last six or seven years, and that was slightly unforeseen, and we ended up steering really heavily into that. There are a lot of amazing drum performances from Josh [Wells, of *Destroyer*], as opposed to *Have We Met*, where the drums couldn't be more canned.

[When] I'm bringing a song into a room and we're learning the song, it always changes. And that's the most exciting part for me. The band has always had the freedom to grab a song and run off with it. It's always been my favorite thing, and sometimes it's amazing and sometimes a disaster. It's just the way it goes.

I've noticed over the years that you've gradually leaned more into a more relaxed vocal style and used your lower register more. How does transforming something as individually identifiable as your voice reflect a transformation in your creative process?

I feel like the transformation was natural and not too conscious and was born of a couple of things. One was, I made this album called *Trouble In Dreams* in 2008, and in my mind, I didn't know how to sing it. It's probably the lyric sheet I'm most proud of, but as an album, it's the one I feel most distant from. I just didn't know how to nail it, and one of the reasons was there were a lot of words. I had a very emphatic, drunken, preachy delivery, which was a signature of *Destroyer* in the 2000s, but I could feel myself souring on it even as I was trying to sing it.

I knew at that point that I wanted to relax and step down from this pulpit. I wanted it to be less dramatic, and I wanted to have a voice that delivered the word and the note on a plate and didn't occupy much more space than that. And that ended up being *Kaputt*.

One of the main things that I did was, I stopped writing. Before, all my writing was pages in little notebooks. *Kaputt* is when I first started just uttering things in a voice memo form. Some songs on *Kaputt* have maybe 20 or 25 words. It's the record that people seem to like the most, and I'm the least present on it. If I started to emote too much, there were strict orders to stop the tape. Most of the vocals are just scratch vocals or placeholders done really early in the process.

That was an extreme example. The move had to be extreme for me to be able to do it. And since then, I've eased up and tried to be able to just sing with a certain amount of emotion and intensity, but in a lower register, in a quieter way. Sometimes, you sing the way that the writing needs you to sing. My writing has probably changed, and what I want to get across has probably changed. And there are strange characters that seep into Destroyer songs, and the characters have changed.

It could always swing back. I could become a really emphatic singer again. Traditionally, as they enter middle age, [singers'] voices lower, and they change and become more relaxed, and that just gets more and more the case. I don't think I'm an exception.

You're one of few rock musicians who has made me laugh many times, but you also have some lyrics that lean more poetic, and over time, your songs have included fewer self-referential lyrics. Can you talk about why humor matters to you and why your self-referential lyrics are less frequent?

I never think of myself as a funny writer, but I know that sometimes, I'll come up with something, and later on, I'll look back at it and it'll crack me up, or I'll laugh at how obnoxious it is, or I'll laugh at how unapologetically poetic it aspires to be.

Not to harp on oldness, but [older] songwriters [often] get more comfortable and just give less of a shit. So you start just throwing anything in there. I find songs become more and more absurd as people get older. The world starts to disappear as you get older. You get farther away from it. And you find yourself muttering things to yourself just to amuse yourself. I'd say the writing is more inward-looking than it's ever been. It's probably problematic.

There's lots of writing on *Labyrinthitis*. There's a line in "June" that goes, "'Inward crackle,' says the fink to himself." To me, that was hilarious, but I have no idea what the world would make of such a line. There's a bunch of lines like that.

As far as the self-referencing, I think that maybe got played up more than I really thought was the case. It was fun to shine a light on what I was doing as I was doing it, hopefully not in a brutally postmodern way, but just to acknowledge the world these songs lived in [and] create a tapestry to make the world larger, to connect the albums to other albums. songs to other songs, whether they're Destroyer songs or songs out there in the world that had become public domain by being part of our everyday lives.

Earlier Destroyer songs were more social, even though I didn't want them to be. I wanted them to be more purely poetic. When I look at them now, which is rare, they scan the world and social groups, little microcosms of the world that I was in, and that stuff seeps into the words. It makes total sense, as someone who's definitely less in the world than he was 20 years ago, for that part to shrink and disappear.

When you're creating music, how do you contend with listener expectations?

I don't. It's so great. I can't imagine doing that. Maybe [that's] because I write words first. I think a lot of people come up with a mood and a vibe, and then they'll come up with chords to fit that...and then at the very end, they'll string some lyrics together and stuff them in there. For me, if I can't sing the song from beginning to end from the very get-go before there's a chord structure, then I walk away. I just don't call it a song and I don't do it.

I don't sit down to write. [My creativity] comes from a different place where I'm not thinking about, "[What] is the audience going to think of this line or series of lines?" I don't think about, "How does this sit next to what I've done before or what I aspire to do in the future?" [My lyrics are] just blurting. I think you can tell when you listen to them. That unconsciousness really does away with what people are going to make of this, especially when you write from the truly debilitating place of words first.

Dan Bejar Recommends:

Drive My Car OST - Eiko Ishibashi

Event Factory - Renee Gladman

The Ravickians - Renee Gladman

Ana Patova Crosses A Bridge - Renee Gladman

Houses of Ravicka - Renee Gladman

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