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July 29, 2024 -

As told to Shy Watson, 2330 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration, Collaboration, Time management.

On being a constant seeker of new inspiration

Musician Kevin Barnes (of Montreal) discusses IRL inspiration, witnessing growth, and trusting one's collaborators.

Something I love about of Montreal is that each of your albums sound so different from the others. What do you think distinguishes Lady on the Cusp from the rest of your discography?

I usually try to get some different instruments or different synths, just to have different palettes to work with from album to album. So with this record, I got into cheap, crappy '90s synths that nobody wants anymore. I thought it would be interesting to use something that's very un-hip or whatever. And try to not necessarily do something that's a pastiche, but something that's in my own style, but just having those be the sounds that I had to work with. I always try to do something a little bit different from album to album just because it's boring to do the same thing over and over again.

And you have such a large discography that it kind of necessitates it. I mean, if it was just 15 albums that sound the same—

Yeah. Part of what drives me creatively is this desire to make something new and different, and that kind of journey or exploration is what is exciting to me. That's also what I look for in other artists. From the beginning it's like, "Okay, you can do this, but now you have to show the world that you can do something else as well."

Yeah, not a one trick pony. I know that with *Lousy with Sylvianbriar*, you hid away in San Francisco and focused really intently on older recording techniques. I was curious if you had some similar but different process when going into *Lady on the Cusp*.

The only thing that would be kind of comparable to that is just the fact that my partner and I were going up to Vermont pretty much every couple of months for a year. So I feel like those journeys kind of informed the record on some levels as far as there are a lot of references to Vermont and the people that I was meeting and hanging out with. I think of it as this pre-Vermont record in a way, but it was also the last record I made in my studio in Georgia. I really wanted to make just one more record before we moved. And so I had this deadline to meet if I was going to be able to finish it in time. And so that was motivating as well.

I read in your press release that you've relocated to Vermont and the lyrics, and this album made me think that maybe you were a little over New York, and of course, I know you're originally from Athens. How do you compare being a creative in an urban center like New York versus somewhere a little more rural or a little smaller like Brattleboro or Athens?

Well, I've never lived in New York, but I spent a lot of time there. I've never lived in an urban setting, only visited. And of course, we mostly play in those kinds of environments. But my daughter actually lives in Manhattan now, and she is going to college there. I've been going to New York a couple times a month for the last eight months or so. It's like I've been in the New York groove, but as far as a living situation, I've always gravitated toward quieter, less congested, less overstimulating environments. It's easier for me if I don't have to hustle as much to earn money, if I can just live somewhere less expensive and have more free time to explore different creative ideas.

But then I also really enjoy going into places like New York, San Francisco, LA, and soaking all that in. We live in the forest right now; it takes basically 30 minutes to get even to the closest small little town, so very much in this secluded world. I don't want to just get all of my inspiration and stimulation from the internet. I try to have it be IRL as much as possible. I love going into bookstores. I love going to theaters that are showing cool movies. And so I love going into New York and going into the Metrograph or going to the Quad Cinema or IFC or wherever. There's a ton of bookstores that I go to all the time when I'm there and just kind of live the life that I probably would live if I lived there. But then I also get to leave and go to my forest again if I want to.

Speaking of the internet, I noticed that you don't have much of a social media platform. Is that something that you've intentionally avoided? Is it something that you think would hinder your practice? Or have you ever considered getting more online for promotion?

I've gone back and forth with it, and more recently I've been more internet-phobic and just feeling more suspicious and wary of it. Engaging with the world through these apps that are owned by these evil ghouls, it just doesn't really feel that great. I've gone through phases where I'm like, "Oh, I need to use my platform." But then I reach this point where I'm like, "So many people are doing that." And so it's not really necessary; it's not like the world's going to stop because I'm not tweeting about something that everyone's talking about or thinking about or whatever. So it's just whenever it pops in my head, I feel like, "Oh, I'll do that." But I'm concerned with not allowing too much of the internet world into my brain.

Smart.

And even if I make a post, I try to avoid the comments, so then I realize I'm not really trying to engage with anyone because there's just so many bad actors and there's so many bots and everything. It's so messy. So you don't even know if you're fighting with a real person or what the deal is. It's just a shady world. And so yeah, occasionally I'll be like, "Oh, I'm going to send this photo just so people know I'm still alive," or whatever, but don't really want it to be a daily thing.

I used to be the youngest person of Montreal shows, and now I always feel like I'm among the oldest. You've been making music since the '90s. How do you think that you've managed to stay relevant with younger listeners as time has gone on?

I don't know, I mean, maybe what we represent is something that's appealing to younger people because we try to create a sort of safe but also a wild environment where people can wear whatever clothes they want, not feel judged. I mean, that's what I'm hoping for, that every concert feels almost like a holiday like Halloween or New Year's Eve or some special occasion. This is out of the ordinary. It's not just a day at the office or whatever. So I think just trying to create that vibe and that kind of atmosphere and hopefully, something universal that's appealing to people who want to experience something like that.

Yeah, absolutely. I grew up in rural Missouri and was turned onto of Montreal when I was in eighth grade. I mean, you guys have been my favorite band ever since. Growing up somewhere so small where there's no outward queerness, no people talking about Bataille or whatever, of Montreal was like a little portal for me that eventually got me way the fuck away from home. I imagine you probably have that effect on a lot of your younger listeners who are just learning through you. Like in *Lady on the Cusp* when you reference Brian Eno, I'm sure some high schooler will listen and be like, "Oh, what's that?"

That'd be great because I feel like I'm a seeker of things, seeker of new sources of inspiration, and so if I can also be a source of inspiration for other seekers, then that's a perfect situation.

Your shows are so energetic. I've seen you play 15 times and every show has been such a treat, especially when you've played with a full band. There've been costumes, visuals, theatrics. I'm assuming these performances take a lot of planning and energy. How are you able to replenish yourself while you're out on tour for so long?

Everybody has a role to play, so no one is really overwhelmed because everyone can kind of just handle their part. I think that helps a lot. And then it is actually energizing to be engaged in a project like that with all your close friends, because everybody that's in the touring group now, we're all really close and we have a long history together and we love each other. So the vibes are great just as far as the hang. And then the show itself is really fun. And especially after you get three or four shows behind you on a tour, you kind of just get into that zone, get into that state of mind, and it becomes almost second nature.

There were tours in the past, most notably the *Skeletal Lamping* and *False Priest* tours where I was running around doing so many costume changes and having weird substances poured on me. I definitely felt more exhausted at the end of the night back then. But we've since created something that's more sustainable and still fun and dynamic, but isn't necessarily setting us on fire every night.

I imagine collaboration comes into play a lot for you. I really liked your new music video for "Young Hearts Bleed Free," how it had this kind of stripped down style. Can you share a little bit about the creative process here and more generally what it's like for you to collaborate with other artists?

What I understand from the little amount of gig work I've done and the gig work that my partner Christina has done is that I should just hire someone whose work I like and then just be like, "Do your thing." I can just imagine how annoying it'd be like if I were saying, "Oh, can you change this thing or can you

change that thing?" Because there's no point in hiring somebody if you don't love what they do.

And so if you do love what they do, then just get out of their way and let them do it. With Madeline, she made the "Young Hearts Bleed Free" video and one for a song that's coming out on Tuesday. Basically she'll present an idea like, "This is my concept." And then I'm always just like, "Cool, let's do it."

I want the person to be excited about what they're doing and feel like I'm behind them supporting them, and that's the case, whether it's Christina making a video or my brother making a video, or whoever it is that's making the video. So yeah, it's not really that collaborative per se. It's just kind of like, "I made the song and now you're making the visuals."

Sounds like you're nice to work with.

Probably because I've been doing this for so long I'm not trying to change the world, or I don't feel like it's going to make or break me or whatever. It's just kind of like, "Yeah, this is cool. Well done." Not like, "Oh, but I don't look like David Bowie enough, or I don't look like Prince enough, or I don't look like whoever enough." It doesn't matter. It's cool. It is what it is. Awesome, let's go.

Aside from money, what are some of the rewards that come from creating music? What has it taught you about yourself?

The initial thing that got me into music was the escapist quality of making music when I was 17 and still living at my parents' house. I got a cassette four track and a pair of headphones and would be in that recording headspace for hours at a time and building up songs one instrument at a time. That escapism aspect of it was something that I just gravitated toward and really got a lot out of. I'm a depressed person. I've always dealt with depression, anxiety, mental health issues. Music provides this weird place, almost like a meditative state of mind where I lose track of space and time, my bodily needs, and anything else that's going on. And it's very centering but also it feels like an adventure. That's the primary reward. And I did it for 10 years before I started making any money.

But money has never been the motivating factor. It's always been just what that process has done for me psychologically. But as far as things that I've learned, it's definitely cool to go back and see, "Wow, I was being really mean in that song." Or, "I wasn't being very generous to that person in that song." Or, "I was too afraid to say what I really felt in that song." So you can see ways that you have grown. I mean, especially if you can see that you've grown, then that means you've grown. So I am able to look back and see, "Oh, I was a different person back then. I was more mercenary. I was more of a pirate. I was more mean-spirited. I was more cynical," or whatever. Or, "I was really optimistic at that time period. I was really sweet. I must have been a nice person then." So you can see the different phases you go through as a human.

Kevin Barnes recommends:

Reading challenging philosophy books

Loving a sports team

Hiking in the forest

Watching Almodovar films

Going to a bar alone, getting drunk and writing free form poetry

Name

Kevin Barnes


Vocation


musician

Fact

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