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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2477 words.

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On living inside of your work

Musician Kevin Morby discusses the benefits of boredom, building a world, and learning how to take lead.

Boredom led you down a creative path as a kid in the Midwest. Does it play a part in your process today?

I was talking about this the other day. Boredom is still there, that same boredom that comes with a midsize, Midwestern city. My life has changed a lot. When I would access that boredom as a child I didn't have this bigger life outside of it. Now there is a feeling where no matter how bored I get in two weeks I'm going to be in Europe or traveling all of America and in a lot of ways I'll be missing that boredom. I'll think to myself, well, it'd be nice to be bored right now because I'm so overwhelmed with how much I have going on. Boredom is an important part of the equation, at least for the past couple of records and my life in general.

Boredom gets a bad rap.

It does. When you think about people's work ethic in the past, work people were able to churn out even without an iPhone, computers or the internet in general, you think people make great work because they're talented. I think everything comes out of being bored and being able to chip away at something, not having any distractions from writing a song, a book, whatever it happens to be. I always talk about how moving back home feels like a sacrifice in a big way, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for my career.

I know I could have more fun in other places. I've lived in those places, I know for a fact they're more fun, but with that fun comes distraction. Now I come here to access that boredom. If I want to access the fun, I'll just go to those places. It is good to be bored, have time to work, and crawl yourself out of the boredom with creativity.

Restrictive environments can make you fight for your own creativity.

Restrictive is a good word for it. When I was living in New York and LA, these super fun places, I had to work other jobs. I really had to hustle, especially in New York where I'd be working mundane jobs. There were these restrictions - you can't just be creative and hang out all the time. You have to work a normal job. When I would be at that normal job, my mind and imagination would wander. My escape from that job was being creative. When music became my living I had nothing but music. If I wasn't on tour or I wasn't in the studio, I really had nothing to do.

That's where the temptations of a popular city would be a bad thing for me. I would have three roommates or I'd have to drive to a practice space. It was hard to access that imagination and creativity. When it comes to any routine around writing, it doesn't matter where I'm at, or if I'm playing a guitar or piano. It's more about creating the time and space to work on it in some capacity. Writing for me is sort of effortless, I'm always writing. It's something that began as a hobby and is now my living, but it's still very much my hobby. I'm doing it because it's therapeutic and it's how I like to pass the time. I'm lucky in that working is also something I do for fun.

When I'm working on a record and it's crunch time, it becomes about living inside of it. I try to set my life up in a way where for these next two weeks, this is the sole focus. For most of the day I'm going to be living inside of this thing. That usually looks like me waking up and immediately working on it. Then eating some food and going back to it. Once I'm done with it, I'll take a little bit of a break then listen back to what I did that day. It's this all encompassing, almost 24/7 regiment. I like to call it 'living inside of it', where that is everything that is happening.

Do you have large, overarching goals in mind when working on an album?

In terms of those decisions, they usually rear their head pretty quickly and make themselves known. Often with my work, it's a reaction to whatever came before it. If I'm making a record with my live band about New York City, perhaps the next thing is going to be a quieter record that's about a rural part of America. There is some thinking involved where I sort of sit around, but more often than not it just seems obvious. In terms of producers, that makes itself pretty clear as well. This Is A Photograph is a great example. I knew the topics I wanted to tackle and the sonic territory I wanted to cover.

There was no one else, it was a no-brainer for me. I had to do it with Sam Cohen because he's the person for this job. The album prior, Brad Cook seemed the perfect person for the job. I'm lucky in that I'm

constantly surrounded by so many talented people, and have so many things I want to do. I can usually line up the project with the person pretty effortlessly.

Have you always felt confident being a bandleader?

It's something that came about slowly, but then came on quickly once I was bestowed that crown. I was in Woods for so long. I got to watch how Jeremy and Jarvis do it. At the same time I was in The Babies for about the exact same time period in length as Woods. I got to co-run that band and was only half of a front person, because Cassie Ramone was also singing songs up there with me. Justin, our drummer, was a big part of the decision making process.

When it came time to do it myself, I felt lucky I had done it from the time I was 18 until about 25, my college years. My education was being in other bands. When I was ready to strike out on my own and had to make those decisions I felt lucky to one, have come from those bands and two, that those bands were rooted in DIY. It sounds cliché, but having slept on floors for years and touring in these shitty vehicles, I had seen the bottom of the barrel. I had scraped down there for a long time.

I understood what it's like to be a hired gun. It makes me think of someone who's been a line cook for a long time, then starting their own restaurant and thinking, "Well, I wanted to be treated like this, so I'm going to make sure to treat my employees like that." A lot of times my girlfriend or friends will call me 'the mayor'. They'll say, "You know everyone, you're the type of person who when you go to a bar, every different circle of friendship is there, and you're the one who has to introduce everyone, that's your role in life." That's made me a well-equipped bandleader and allowed me to bring together a certain cast of characters and be the unifying force in that.

Are there parts of the role you don't enjoy?

The biggest learning curve, because I come from DIY and because I want to be the person who is answering to everyone, has been letting go of some of the details that in the past I would've taken care of myself. Now I give my trust to the people I've hired to work around me. That's been a big thing I've had to learn, but it's been very important so I can keep my eye on the prize, and the prize being the creative part of the job.

You're a big believer of 'building a world' within your songs/albums. How do you go about this?

When it comes to building that world, something I've had to be fearless with, is recurring characters, themes, or sonic palettes. I want someone to turn on one of my records or songs and immediately identify it as mine because it feels like that world. In the same way that if I turn on a Destroyer record, I know I'm in Dan Bejar's world. He's an example of someone who's created his own world over the past couple of decades. It's so easy to identify. You can bring new characters in, but maybe they're interacting with some of those old characters. I'm not so consciously building the world, but when it's taking shape, I try to let it be what it wants to be and not resist it.

I like to think of one's catalog as, not to sound cheesy, as a river where it's always flowing and you can dip in at any moment. You're like, it's different here than it is over there, but it's all the same. It's all super muddy. Am I in the Mississippi River? I think mood is a huge part of it.

What are some takeaways from demoing on a 4-track vs. digitally?

Anytime you can eliminate a screen, it makes for a better experience. I have all these demos for each song on This Is A Photograph. I'm getting ready to dole them out, and the only one that's properly done on the 4-track is for my song called 'Disappearing'. I love all of them but the one for 'Disappearing' is in my opinion so much better than all the other digital ones. It honestly feels releasable. It reminded me that when I had taken it to Sam Cohen, he was a proponent of like, why don't we just put this on the record? The vibe is so cool.

There is such a vibe with the 4-track that's built into the machine. It immediately has this mood and its own little world to it. It helps break down any creative walls that you might have up vs working digitally where if I get an email that pops up as I was recording it's obviously going to take away from it. There's a coldness to working digitally. My demos that are digital don't have their built in world. You could create that world, and Sam Cohen, as an amazing example, can create an incredible world digitally that feels warm and inviting. With the 4-track I can become a different person or another version of myself within it that feels inspiring and creates the foundation for better work.

What is your relationship with your work before/after it's released?

I was very, very close to This Is A Photograph. All my records I put my whole self into, but this one, because of the pandemic, had created time and space for me to go do the research and work on the album in a way I'd never had before. I had nothing to do but work and live inside of these songs. There was no upcoming tour or recording sessions while I was writing it. The weeks leading up to release, I felt this weird vertigo where I didn't want to give it away. It made me think of when I was 29 and I was getting ready to turn 30, I had no fear about it. In my heart I've been 30 for years, but the two weeks leading up to it, I got actually panicked. I was like, no, I don't want to do this. I want to go back.

I want to go back to that magical time of living in Memphis at the Peabody Hotel and working on this album. Where it was just mine and belonged to no one else, and it was just taking shape. Once it came out

it was celebratory and felt great. It feels like the record is resonating in a way that the others haven't. It feels validating. I think people are sensing that I put 110% into this thing. Seeing the positive reception obviously helps. If I put *This Is A Photograph* out and everyone said, "This sucked," I would've been even more upset.

I think every artist feels this way. It's yours, and then you truly give it away. Once you give it away, when I listen to the songs, they're different. It feels like I'm listening to something made by someone else. Whereas before that release date, it's solely mine and I listen to it all the time. Once it comes out, I never listen to it unless I'm practicing to play live. I'm just done with it.

For a long stretch you always had another album in your back pocket. That wasn't the case with *This Is a Photograph*? How did that feel?

It was a huge relief. It felt like a burden was lifted. It was a cool feeling to be like, "I have a record in my back pocket." That happened with every album. Singing Saw and City Music were a package. Oh My God and Sundowner were a package. I don't think it's a coincidence that suddenly I had so much time to just work on one thing. In the past *This Is A Photograph* could have been divided and felt like two records. I wanted this to be a more masterful work. I wanted it to be all my moods in one, a complete record.

Rather than it being a lot of songs, I wanted it to be the 10 best songs from a batch of 20. I wanted no stone left unturned, for it to feel like I went to every nook and cranny and made sure every part of the foundation was strong. To be honest with you, going forward I only want to work that way.

If the inspiration comes where I can't help but have two albums that's great, but I want to be sure to give myself the time and space to explore everything an album has to offer. I am always writing new songs, but I'm not trying to get ahead of myself. I like to think that I'm still living inside of *Photograph* and now I'm taking the show on the road. I want to be present for that as well, not just looking towards the next thing. That's a big lesson that the pandemic taught me, to live inside of things a little bit more and let the next thing reveal itself.

Kevin Morby Recommends:

Cold watermelon with lime

The Hard Crowd by Rachel Kushner

Widow Basquiat by Jennifer Clement

H. Hawkline's live performance

Hurray for the Riff Raff - *Life on Earth*

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