On finding the soul of a song

My Bloody Valentine vocalist and guitarist Kevin Shields discusses songwriting, the infinite nature of good ideas, and the psychedelic possibilities of playing music very loud.

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As told to Gary Canino, 1951 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Production, Collaboration.

You're playing unreleased material live for the first time. How do you see the new songs fitting in with the continuum of the rest of your work?

Everything I do is a bit like myself in the end. I've recorded a lot of music over the years that never came out, so there's a gap between where we were and where we're going. You notice it more when you play live because you feel the way it feels in relation to the audience. You learn your own music through that. Usually when you play old songs and new songs, people find the old songs easier to relate to, and you're more comfortable with the old songs. But with one new song in particular, people immediately seemed to catch on to it. It's pretty much the same music that we've always done, immediate and very simple, but not contrived.

Songs and music are so simple in many ways. But there's a special ingredient that you have no control over, which is just playing something because you enjoy it. It's very simple and very obvious, but it can actually sort of get the music to work. Whereas if you contrive something, and only make it up and play it because you want it for an intellectual reason, it doesn't seem to have that magic ingredient anymore. Not that I'm trying to do too many contrived things, but I learned years ago that when the thinking is contrived there's something wrong.

You mentioned these gaps of time in between releases. The recording of *m b v* began in 1996, but the album came out in 2013. When you revisit material you began a decade or more before, do you have a process for determining which material you want to continue with?

It's difficult, because I'm not really organized, and I've never really done anything the way I would have preferred to. I have a huge backlog, but I've also had a realization from writing music for most of my life. When I write music, it's all contextual, as if every song has its own little soul. At the time it's written, it makes sense, and then at another time, it can make sense again, but it might not make sense at any given particular time, or it doesn't resonate in a strong way at that moment.

When it comes to quality, there's actually not a big difference between used material or unused material. It's a connection to a song that makes me want to continue working on it. For example, let's say I've had a really good idea and I didn't do anything with it. In a lot of instances, the same idea might occur to somebody else. If you don't do it, someone else will. It might take 20 years, but that same idea will exist one day. I don't have strong feelings about particular songs that are unreleased, because I know at some point they will exist, and if I don't release it, then it's not lost to the world forever. The creative process doesn't feel that personal to me, because I don't think it's just about me. It's about a more generalized [idea] that every creative person locks into or becomes in sync with. Then they realize it, and that's how things are.

What was the process of collaborating with Brian Eno for "Only Once Away My Son?"

It was a really great experience. I was more of a guest musician, and he was very much producing and directing it. It was very fast and spontaneous, which is his way of working. The technical side really doesn't get in the way of the process, but at the same time it's not random. There was direction and focus mixed in with a ton of spontaneity. He's got a way of working that never gets in the way of interesting accidents happening. It's directionless and purposeful at the same time. I've worked with Primal Scream as well for years, and my role is just to elaborate on things as opposed to instigating them, or to just create as opposed to control.

How do you know when something is finished?

My mind is nearly like an infinite tunnel of potential ideas, but the ideas are all a part of what is already there. In my imagination, I always think there are more parts to record. Then when I work it through, I make it to a certain point and I'm like, "Actually, that's enough." Some of the extra bits that I'm thinking of are suggested anyway by interaction with what is already there, and it gets to a point where to add anything more would just be too much. I often imagine recording parts that people actually do hear, but are not actually there. By the time I'm done with the main guitar and other elements, [more parts] don't capture anything else with all those suggested things. If I try to realize them, it's less effective. I think that's why people have often said they hear different things depending on how they listen to [our music].

90% of the time when something is done, it's done suddenly. It's like I'm doing and doing and doing and I'm thinking, "I've got more to do. I've got more to do." I always think I'm going to put in five different [parts], and I usually end up doing two. Parts that have a melodic or a sonic frequency kind of relationship suggests a third part. You've got part A, part B, and then part C also appears to exist there. I feel very conscious of that when I'm doing it and so I imagine I'll do part C because I hear it, but then when I go to record it, it seems like too too much. You can either record them or not record them. But then I start to realize there's a blueprint or impression that's already there. I'm trying to fill in or bring life to a recording, but what tends to happen is that at a certain point, it's usually finished sooner than later. I guess that's when I realize things are finished, when I suddenly hear it and there's an invisible glass ceiling up above [*laughs*]. Even though in my head, I see things in a visual way, or in a harmonic relationship. But you don't have to record every part for them to still exist.

There's the finest line between nothing and something.

Always. It's always like that.

My Bloody Valentine is notorious for their loud live shows. You've also mentioned how you like to listen to music through a speaker at its maximum volume. What's the overall philosophy with playing this loud?

Yes and no. Volume on one level has a rippling effect, and starts to limit the boundaries of what's happening. It starts to crunch, and then you just get an ever-changing form of shapes because of that. When I'm mixing music, I actually don't mix it very loud. An important part of the process is not just depending on volume for recordings, and remembering that you can work at any volume. Volume can just be an experiment. In itself, volume creates a more personal interpretation of what's happening.

There's always been psychedelic elements of volume, and the conscience alters elements as you hear them. Doctors are discovering that's biologically true. It's also true from the perspective of perception because when something is that loud, you're hearing different harmonic relationships and you're also hearing your own ears start to distort the sound. Your hearing is your own personal version of what your relationship to sound is. What I find good about loud volume is that I actually perceive it more as an expression of freedom and individuality. The idea of having the so-called correct sonic representation has a lot of baggage attached to it. If something is loud, it forces you to just experience and accept it.

Volume is transportive in a biological way; you can watch it change people's perception of what's happening around them. It changes things. It becomes more mature than something that's just there. Concerts, and especially festivals nowadays, are making listening very removed. There has been a general push towards lowering the volume that bands can play at live, especially in Europe. It's a huge issue when people's experience of music is hearing some digital representation of music on a far quieter volume than it would have been done when it was created and played in a natural environment. In the world at the moment, volume should be a personal choice. People should be able to just use earplugs. The weird things about ears is they're really easy to deal with. You just put something in them to protect them. That's why we've always given out free earplugs for the gigs. It's a part of the personal

experience, which is about choice. It’s not about control.

There are always the few people who boast about making it through a show without earplugs.

Yeah, totally. But playing loud is not control anyway, because when you’re playing at a certain volume, it’s actually harder to control the space and the environment and the perception of what’s happening. That way, [the set] is like an animal or something that’s far more spontaneous than controlled, and it’s harder to moderate it in a way that is “correct.”

In pop music, and with all the drum-heavy music, it’s always been about volume. A drum kit in itself begins to force people to be at a certain volume. It’s hard to play very quietly around the drum kit. Even if you were to measure the volume of someone playing an acoustic guitar and singing, it’s actually quite significant and loud. Music is loud. It’s a loud thing, and it’s always been that way. We live in a time when it seems like it’s an issue to be loud, but music’s never been quiet. If you were in an orchestra playing Mozart’s music years ago, it would be loud.

We definitely experimented a lot with volume, especially in 2008. If there’s purpose to it and it means something, you can do an awful lot with volume. It can be really amazing. I’m not talking about the stupidity of volume, like a car with a siren driving by. It’s more the fact that when you are dealing with actual music—with rhythm and sound—you can be very loud and still have a really positive effect. It’s not a negative thing. It might damage your hearing, but ears weren’t built to last. Earplugs are good because your body’s still experiencing the volume. You’re just gaining a new experience, that’s all.

I’ve even read that at a few shows you couldn’t get to the maximum volume for the infamous live noise section on “You Made Me Realise.”

We definitely experienced maximum possible volume for that song a few times. But the only place beyond that volume would be pure experimentation with an audience, which wouldn’t be entertainment. You don’t want bricks falling out of buildings or covering people in dust, that’s dangerous. It became a scientific experiment because we reached that point where we didn’t know what would happen if we continued further.

Essential Kevin Shields:

You Made Me Realise (1988)

Isn’t Anything (1988)

Tremolo (1991)

Loveless (1991)

m b v (2013)

“City Girl” from Lost in Translation (2003)

Name
Kevin Shields

Vocation
Musician