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As told to Matt Mitchell, 2674 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Collaboration, Inspiration, Identity.

On making things you like at your own pace

Musician King Tuff discusses the benefits of collaboration, embracing the unknown, and why anyone can play a musical instrument.

Before we get into the music, one thing that's been on my mind is the hand gesture that you make in almost all of your Instagram posts. I'm really curious about the origin of that, what it's begun to symbolize in the court of King Tuff.

A few years back, I think I just started doing it. It just started doing it in photos and it was a natural thing that came to do when you take a photo. But, I feel like it's come to symbolize the majesty of life and nature. Usually the photos are in a majestic place and it's like a chef's kiss, almost

It's more personal than a peace sign.

Yeah, it's just like, "Oh, life is good and big and you have to embrace it." I mean, I just ended up having all of these photos of myself doing it, so it's like, "You have to use these somehow." Consistency is key!

Yes it is. You're 100% right. So, it's been about five years since *The Other* came out. You've always taken your time in-between releases. Do you buy into the notion that successful productivity is measured by constant output?

I think having a constant output is certainly helpful to your career. I'm not trying to take so long in-between albums. It just, for whatever reason, kind of happened that way. I do wish I was a little more consistent, just because, in this world, people have such a short attention span. If you're not up in their faces all the time, they forget about you. Every time I put out an album, there's this feeling that I'm starting over, which is cool, in a way, because every album feels like a new chapter. I think there's just different kinds of bands, and I'm the kind of band that changes a lot and takes my time. I'm just getting in my own world.

You've got thousands of artists fighting for such little opportunity in people's listening habits.

Yeah. But, you can't think about that when you're making stuff. You just gotta make stuff you like at your pace.

I was reading an interview you did back in 2018. You said that the time between *Black Moon Spell* and *The Other* was a "psychic reset." In the time since *The Other*, a lot of people have had to undergo their own kinds of resets, reevaluations, and reconfigurations. How have the last three years affected the way *Smalltown Stardust* came to be?

I think I certainly would have made a very different album if it hadn't been for the pandemic. I think everyone has changed in many ways and we don't really realize it yet. I feel like now I'm just waking up from the past three years. I'm like, "Oh, what was I doing before? Oh, yeah, I do this stuff." And I go out there and get back to what I was doing. In regards to the sound of the album, the subject matter of it, I think being at home in LA, without, really, anywhere to go or anything to do, there were no life experiences happening. So I had to go into my own memories and live there. I just, naturally, started thinking about Vermont a lot, because I was missing the nature and I was stuck in hot LA. It was on fire.

I was thinking of greener places and having a community and I was trying to conjure those feelings in the songs and also conjure some kind of joy from the music, because we didn't have much joy coming in other ways.

I've often thought about your music in a similar way, how it is a bit wayfaring, a little bicoastal, much like your own identity as a person. Before this record, how did different points of geography impact the way your creativity bled into the songs?

I think I've always written really different types of songs, depending on the place I'm in. I really do feel different feelings in different places. When I go back to Vermont, I get into different emotional states that just don't happen in LA. Some are connected to weather and smells. And then, vice-versa, I have different feelings here. I just write different kinds of songs, depending on what my surroundings are. I also do think there's different ideas floating around in different places. I do think the location has a lot to do with what comes out.

I think that [Smalltown Stardust] sounds much more like a record that is very much indebted to, not necessarily rural, but the prettier, hidden away parts of the world, but with some sounds that have this Laurel Canyon gloss to them.

I live in Mount Washington, which I call the poor man's Laurel Canyon. I think I was doing a lot of "remote viewing," as I say, to try and get [to Vermont], even though I wasn't there.

Going off what you were talking about, about nature in regards to the songwriting, everybody kind of found themselves yearning or longing for someplace, a nearby, bygone era almost, during the pandemic. I like how you said that, when you were stuck at home in LA, you were missing Vermont. Was there a certain point where you came to the conclusion that you'd lost a certain kind of touch with the marvels of everyday life?

Certainly. The weird thing is, the first few years were great. Obviously, there was all this fucked up shit happening. But, actually being off the road, I think, for a lot of musicians, being off the road was really healing in a lot of ways. To just be able to actually be at home and just chill out and take a breath. Before, I was already very exhausted from touring for so many years, so I certainly needed that break. But then, after two years of it or so, it was kind of like, "Oh, now I'm depressed, because I haven't been having any experiences. There's been nothing coming in to fill the well of inspiration."

A few months back, I was talking to a different musician who I really admire, and he was telling me about his new album and how he had to basically write it with only the inspiration in a close proximity to him, the one-block radius of his neighborhood. And I think about the line in "Portrait of God," where you talk about oil painting in the garage. Did you ever get to that point where you had to tap into the very immediate things that were around you, rather than some of the more speculative stuff that you've meandered about in past lyrics?

Definitely. I set up my easel in my yard. I set up a little outdoor studio. So, I just found different zones around my house, hung out, moved around my furniture to feel like I was in a new place. I was so very lucky to be here with Sasami and Meg Duffy because, you know, we're all working on our respective records and working on them together. It was really a blessing. That's where a lot of the inspiration came from, just being around those two and feeding off of each other.

When I spoke with Meg in 2021 about *Fun House*, they talked so warmly about how you and Sasami really influenced the writing and production on that album. I'm curious about the flip side of that, how their influence worked its way onto *Smalltown Stardust*?

Meg didn't actually play on my record, but they're fully there in spirit. They were emotional support, just making salads for us. Having their vibe around was nice. I think I've always been the most inspired by my friends, especially my friends that are also songwriters. Those are the people that have always been my biggest inspirations, so it was really nice to be so involved in their music as well.

You've said before that you always thrive around other people making things. What did being a part of a small musical ecosystem do, not just for the album, but for you as an artist? When you were working on *Smalltown Stardust*, what did you learn about yourself as an artist that had never shown itself so clearly before?

Working with Sasami was really incredible, because she comes from a very different background. She is classically trained. She's really good at, not just string arrangements, but full song arrangements. She's very much a producer in a classic way where she can take a song that's one way and hear it in a totally different, new way and see how the arrangement should be. She knocks it out and has a very keen ear for harmony and pitch. I think, after working on these two records, my ear for pitch is so much stronger. It's really interesting, just from working with her and seeing how keyed into it she was, I started to be able to hear it better myself, which was really cool.

Everyone has their own techniques of writing and arranging and recording, so it's interesting whenever you work with someone. You learn their techniques and you incorporate them into your own methods. That's been really rewarding.

I've been thinking a lot about how the production side of music informs an artist's own approach to building a record.

We [Sasami and I] were working on her record, she'd never made a super heavy rock record before. So I was like, "We need to get you playing through some stacks." She bestowed upon me a keen ear for pitch and arrangement and I bestowed the stack upon her.

I think the arrangements have grown lush over time, and *Smalltown Stardust* feels so far away from the neo-psychedelic, stoner doom, insert-Spotify-wrapped-genre-name-here vibes of those early records. Beyond collaboration and the immediacy of who's near you and making music, what's made your scope shift from heavier guitars to layered vocal harmonies and string arrangements?

I think, in a lot of ways, this record is much closer to the kind of music I listen to. It's very much letting my Beatles influence come through more. But, for some reason, it hasn't really been a big thing in the records. I do think, on *Was Dead*, "Sun Medallion," it's acoustic guitar and drums. There are songs throughout the other records that are more tender. But this record just leans into that stuff a lot more. It's much more of a songwriter record, I would say.

You mentioned earlier that, if the pandemic hadn't happened, this record would look so different. When you started really sitting down and working on the songs for record, what did it look like originally, as opposed to the final product that we have now?

I started writing songs after my album cycle for *The Other* was over in 2019. It really started when I got a piano in late summer 2019. I got a piano and started trying to learn a little bit. That opened up a whole new world of writing and writing completely different than on guitar. Songs like "The Bandits of Blue Sky" and "Love Letters to Plants" were written on piano. Those songs, I would have been able to write on a guitar. That was really a key to the shift in sound and writing style.

That's something that has interested me, because you're not the first artist who has told me about switching to songwriting on the piano. What is it specifically about that switch that changes the alchemy of a song?

I think a lot of it has to do with not knowing what you're doing. I never took lessons on guitar. I never took piano lessons. So, I just sit down and find notes and chords that interest me. And since I don't have any understanding of what they are, I'm just playing in the dark a little bit. But that's where the interesting things come out. You can get chord voicings on the piano that are really hard to do, or impossible to do, on guitar that are really beautiful.

I've never learned how to play an instrument, but I'm always interested in the technical side of them. I can listen and say whether or not I think they sound good, but the idea of how they're constructed is often lost on me, so thank you for laying it out so succinctly.

I think anyone can play an instrument, you just have to be fearless and not afraid to mess up. Most of it is just hearing what you like, it doesn't have anything to do with technique. People who are so technically good make a lot of really bad music. I often veer towards the amateur sounds that are, often, more interesting and have more personality.

And those are the tunes that stick around and have such a good longevity to them. To touched on it earlier our conversation, how, over the last couple of years, you've had to reintroduce yourself to making songs and playing them live. In one of your Instagram posts, you mentioned that, since COVID, you were in the FBI and you were Batman, I'm curious about what you see King Tuff becoming beyond *Smalltown Stardust*.

I'm excited to play music with other people again. I don't want to be on the road all the time, so I'm trying to figure out how to do that. I do love making records. I love writing songs. I love making records with other people, so I hope to do more of that, just recording other people. But, I also want to focus more on my visual art in the future, which is something that I've always done, but it's kind of fallen by the wayside the past 15 years, since I started really doing music as a career. The visual art balances out the music with me, so, when I'm doing both, they inform each other. I get a lot of ideas from doing one, then I get an idea for the other one. I like going back and forth between the two, so I'm hoping to do more of that.

King Tuff Recommends:

Zelda: Breath Of The Wild: This game is obviously well known as one of the best video games ever made and I will say this: it's the best video game ever made. I grew up playing *Zelda*, but haven't really played video games for 20 years. So I bought a Switch just to play this. I've tried other switch games and they don't do anything for me, but *BOTW* speaks to my SOUL.

Electric pencil sharpener: Is there anything better than sitting down and sharpening every pencil you own? At an extremely rapid pace? And oh the glorious smell of wood shavings and pulverized lead! Joy!

Jewelry: People need to wear a lot more jewelry. Especially men. I'm talking gems, chains, silver and gold, earrings with gems and bracelets with gems and necklaces with gems, rings, rings, oh so many rings, gems, and any sparkly accoutrement you can find. Do not be afraid to sparkle people! And gems.

Comfortable clothes: Somehow it took me 40 years to learn how to dress comfortably. I've always been wearing clothes that are too tight, cutting off my circulation for the sake of rock n roll or something...I don't know! Now I've got the softest pants and I do the softest dance.

Microminiature Worlds: Do yourself a favor and go outside and zone in on some microminiature worlds. Any small patch of grass or bit of fallen log will do, preferably something with lichen or moss. There is so much to see in an inch of nature, it will put you in your place and remind you that you are part of a true masterpiece of living art.

Name

King Tuff


Vocation

musician


Fact

Wyndham Garnett

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