

On rejecting the idea of cultural appropriation



Musician Manuel Gagneux of Zeal and Ardor on sifting out all your own bad ideas, the uneasy influence of racism and politics on his creative output, and why artists should be free to find inspiration everywhere.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2303 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Identity](#), [Politics](#), [Mental health](#), [Beginnings](#).

How do you generally start writing a song? Do you have an instrument that you usually reach for first?

It varies from guitar to computer to piano or just something sung. It doesn't really matter. Sometimes it's a guitar lick or something vocal or just a sensory thing. When you're trying to create something you're kind of desperate, and it's always that hunt for something that's good. It's like when you drink and you try to be happy but sometimes you drink and you just get sadder than you already are. It's about hunting down something good, something worth hunting.

What about lyrically? Are you writing ideas down constantly, or do you only write when there's a song to write to?

I do write stuff into my phone, and those are mostly snippets that I might find interesting three months later—I might elaborate on them then. But on a day-to-day basis, it's just short ideas that I try to make sense of.

Have you ever experienced writer's block?

Not really. There have been times when I tried to make something specific and it ended up being something wholly different, but not writer's block, per se. I think just delusions of grandeur, I guess. [laughs]

Do you try to play music or write every day, or do you only do those things when inspiration strikes?

When I'm not on tour, I try to get up at nine a.m. and I'm in front of my computer or in front of a piano until close to midnight. As glorified as the creative process is, it's also like a trap and it's a shit show, you know? Ninety percent of what I do personally is bad, so I have to sift through a lot of bad ideas to get to the good stuff, and the way to do that is to write a lot of stuff.

I think a lot of people work similarly.

Well, it's about volume, I guess. Then you can be selective, but you have to have something to be selective from.

On your latest album, *Stranger Fruit*, you're balancing extreme metal with a distinct pop sensibility. Was that deliberate or did the songs just come out that way?

I think it's just me. I really love heavy music, but I also can't really shake the fact that I really love pop, so I guess it's just the most direct thing to come out of me. It's not calculated in the way that you think it is, but it is calculated in other ways. It's not a deliberate effort to be more poppy, it's just less filtered, I guess.

Is it important for you to write songs that you can hum along to—something that's memorable?

I guess it is. It's not about catchiness, but I think there's something inherent about melodies that you can be part of. It's like this hippie notion that if you're at a concert and you can sing along, that's a wonderful moment. I think that's what I'm hoping to create.

A few years ago, I spoke with Demonaz from Immortal, one of the great Norwegian black metal bands, who told me he writes all his songs in his head. He goes on long walks in the mountains near his home and just writes riffs in his head. I asked him if he ever worries about forgetting them, and he said, "If I don't remember it, it probably wasn't worth remembering." What do you think of that idea?

I'd be in a whole lot of trouble if I did it that way. [Laughs] Though that's a really fuckin' cool thing to do, I don't think I'd be capable of that. For me it's about iteration. I have to jot down what I just had in my head, or I'll just have another idea or I'll just simply forget. But that is cool and admirable.

When Zeal & Ardor first started getting some attention, you became a lightning rod for controversy because you combined black metal with American slave spirituals. Has that controversy died down over the past year or so?

It may have, but I live in Switzerland where people don't really know about any of that, and in my day-to-day life it doesn't really matter. But I think as far as media presence goes, definitely, of course. I think it's a fun story to tell or to write, because it has that kind of hype-able thing to it, but with every hype there is certainly a dumbing down or a flattening of it that's bound to happen. I think it's normal.

What I thought was interesting about the discussion around you was that—unlike a lot of controversies in the music world—yours was actually based on the music you were making rather than on your personal life or something you said on the internet. In a way that was refreshing: People were actually talking about the music.

Yeah, I'm just too boring for that. [Laughs] I'd have to work hard for an actual controversy about my life, but I really like that, too—that it's about the music. But then again, even that is just like a cool tagline. I don't think it has longevity and I'm very realistic about that.

I agree. You've also made a successful career out of an artistic project that basically started out as a dare from a racist on a message board, who challenged you to combine black metal with "neger music." Do you have conflicted feelings about that, or do you view it as a triumph in a way?*

No, I don't care. I mean it happened, and I think it's a nice checkmate to the racist who instigated it, but beyond that, I'm just happy to play gigs and travel around the world with my friends, so I wouldn't even think about that too much.

That has to be a unique origin story for a band, though...

It is very this millennium, I'll give you that. [Laughs]

The last time we spoke was not long after the first Zeal & Ardor album, *Devil Is Fine*, came out. At the time, you said you felt like you were playing a character when you were singing those songs. How would you describe that character?

Well, I was a very angry person, but I came to learn that it's not that much of a character. It's just something that I've been... that I'm not giving attention to [that part] of myself. And of course the words are fiction—I

don't want to fucking kill people or anything, but everyone has rage in them, and that's something that's not really given that much attention. People are very attentive to sadness or to happiness, but actual anger is a different thing in this society. I'm not saying that violence should be tolerated, but people have these emotions, and I think I certainly do. To me, this was just a great way to let it out.

Do you think these are feelings that you would otherwise keep bottled up in an unhealthy way?

I personally do, but I have also read about actors who play angry roles for a long time, and then they get angry themselves. I think it's this hormonal imbalance thing, that if you force yourself to be angry on a regular basis, that your hormones just say, "Oh, we're angry now, and that's just the status quo." That's something I'm dreading right now.

Are you singing more as yourself on *Stranger Fruit*, or is it just a matter of the character changing a little?

The last time we spoke, [Zeal & Ardor] didn't have that many live gigs, and now we've played I guess 200 or something. I have to be that character or be myself in that regard quite a bit now, and I'm not sure if it's me accepting that it's myself or me just letting that character into my actual life. It's this gray zone of not being certain who it is... it's a chicken-and-egg situation.

And a little bit of Jekyll and Hyde too, maybe.

[Laughs] Yeah, but I don't want to think about that. It gets... oh god, I need to talk to someone professional, huh?

I wouldn't go that far. But to what extent do you see what you're doing as theater?

That's just the thing—it's diminished to the point that I'll just be myself on stage, but a very angry version of myself, so I'll be very angry at that time. I don't really enjoy theatrics when I see a concert—I think it dilutes the honesty or just diminishes it—and it's less direct that way. How we work as a band is that we just lose ourselves in the music and I think we lost the abstraction of that role-playing, I guess. That's what happens. That sounded very pretentious, I'm sorry. Carry on.

It seems like some of the songs on *Stranger Fruit* have been interpreted as political or even as a call to revolution. The song "Servants," for example. Was that your intention when you wrote it?

Yeah, it was, because with *Devil Is Fine*, if you appropriate or if you address elements of slavery and want to bring it into the modern day, it's very dumb to not give context or to not actually address what's going down nowadays. So that [song] was the result of that, cause the shit's pretty bad, man.

I've been doing a lot of interviews lately with musicians who've been around for a long time but who've never done political songs in their entire careers—until now. When I ask them about it, the general consensus seems to be, "With the way the world is going these days, how can you not?" Do you feel that way?

Definitely. I wouldn't say that music has been sedated or anything for the last, let's say two decades, but it's just such a dire situation that we're in. You can't help but actually talk about it.

Living in Switzerland, do you feel like you have a certain distance from what's going on in other parts of the world?

Well, I do have an outsider's view of things, but it's a global issue. There are right-wing extremists gaining political popularity globally, and that's not normal. That hasn't been normal, ever. Even here in Switzerland it's palpable. In regards to the U.S., of course I have an outsider's view, but this stuff is cooking here, too. It's not pretty.

Do you see your music being interpreted differently by people in different parts of the world?

I notice this with listeners: When we play a gig anywhere in Europe, they'll talk about how interesting the mix [of musical styles] is, but when we play in the States, they'll go on about how important this is and how they relate to the music politically. I think that speaks volumes.

When *Devil Is Fine* was released, the term "cultural appropriation" would come up in reference to your music. You even mentioned it yourself a few minutes ago. But you reject the idea of cultural appropriation—you feel that all music should be available for anyone to incorporate into their own style. Why do you think that's important?

I think it's not even just music. If you would expand that idea to science, why shouldn't an Asian scientist be able to use, say, an Indian method or an American method in his work? It's a point of cultural stagnation. If you isolate yourself, reject other ideas, and prohibit your own ideas from being incorporated in other countries' works or in other cultures' works, that's just a silly thing to do.

There's also a distinct religious or spiritual aspect to your music, even though you consider yourself an atheist. Do you see a contradiction there?

No, because I think since music and culture is global and universal, I should be able to incorporate elements from everywhere. Of course, I'm speaking here from a very safe distance, as I said, but wouldn't it be sad if you, as a man in America, aren't allowed to listen to polka or to use polka? I mean, you might not be crazy about polka, but wouldn't it be sad if that were in some way prohibited simply because it's just not from your country or from your culture?

I completely agree, but what I'm asking is a little bit different. I'm talking about incorporating something into your music that you openly don't believe in. You're an atheist using religious music.

For me, it's a two-way street. As a Black guy, I'm also appropriating elements of this very Nordic, Scandinavian-as-fuck culture, and mixing them with this other culture I really like. I should be accused of both sides, but I'm only being accused of one, and that's really weird.

Why do you think that is?

I think because I'm obviously Black-ish, I guess, and I'm not that obviously European. But that doesn't even make sense, you know? Like I said, it's a very silly thing.

Last but not least, it seems like *Stranger Fruit* is more extreme than *Devil Is Fine*. What direction do you see Zeal & Ardor moving in?

That's a point of contention. I think we have to think about what we want to be, because just reiterating or doing the same thing again would be lazy. I'm pretty much a fan of reinventing ourselves, not too extremely but to a certain degree, and I think that'll just take time. Maybe the next one will be a flamenco record or some weird shit. We'll see.

Suggested Manuel Gagneux:

Zeal & Ardor, *Devil Is Fine* (2017)

Zeal & Ardor, *Stranger Fruit* (2018)

Name

Manuel Gagneux

Vocation

Musician

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