November 4, 2021 -

As told to Danielle Chelosky, 2035 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Independence, Collaboration.

On making work to connect with the world around you

Musician Noah Weinman (Runnner) discusses solitude, asking questions, being open to chance, and leaving room in your work for others.

How has the pandemic affected your process of making music?

Half of [the new record] is rerecorded material from three or four years ago, so I think that the pandemic definitely put me in a place where I felt like I had time to revisit those songs that I cared a lot about. I didn't think that I really nailed the recording the first time around. I had been looking for an opportunity to redo some of those songs. And, yeah, at the beginning of the pandemic, I felt really good about having all this extra time where I could record these songs that have been just stockpiling. But then by the fall, I felt like I exhausted that pile and I wasn't necessarily writing new stuff. So it was nice to be able to go back to even older stuff and rerecord it.

What was it like revisiting those old songs? Could you still identify with them or did they feel weirdly distant?

I definitely still identify with them. For most songs I feel like I remember the specific moment when I wrote that song. Some of them it's funny, because I still do remember that moment, but sometimes it feels like an out-of-body experience, like, "Oh, did I really write that? That doesn't sound exactly me." But most of the songs, lyrically, I think still really hold up. And there were a lot of similarities in my life in 2016 and in 2020. They were times of more isolation in my life. I think during those times I usually make music as an attempt to reach out and reconnect with the world that I feel distant from. So the immediate circumstances of the songs from 2016 and 2017 don't really apply to my life in 2020, but I think that the general emotional takeaway of the songs still really resonated with me.

Is making songs a way to immortalize people and moments out of the fear of not having them anymore?

Yeah. I definitely see that. There was a time where I was just writing songs and I wasn't keeping a journal. Now, I pretty intensely do both, but I definitely see having songs as a journal of sorts, because it's more coded. I don't know if I feel comfortable putting down things where people might recognize themselves in the songs, so I tend to blur some of the details, but I can listen back to the songs and remember exactly what that moment is. If you really know me, you can probably decode it, but it is definitely a way for me to keep track of those things. And I have a lot of demos and stuff that might never see the light of day, but they're important little milestones in my life.

Do you think that you make music more for yourself than for other people?

I do, because I think that something that I find myself revisiting in my music is this want and this need to reach out and to connect, but then also this fear of connecting and also wanting to be alone. So I think that there's this push-pull that I'm reckoning with in the songs that makes it feel a little bit more insular than if I was really fully reaching out, if that makes sense. I think that, obviously, I'm aware that these songs will be released and once they're released, they're not really mine anymore. And I'm cool with that. I feel like that's the natural process of a song. So there is definitely always an awareness of an audience, but I think I mostly write these songs for me.

So you don't mind when they inevitably get interpreted in different ways?

No. And I think that's something that a lot of people feel differently about. I don't really mind if

someone takes away different interpretation that what I intended, because the act of anybody interpreting something is, I feel, enough of a connection, even if we're not getting the same literal result. And I'm sure that there are songs that I love that I think really speak to me that I'm probably misinterpreting from their original intent. I listen to the *New Yorker: Fiction* podcast sometimes when I'm doing long drives and I'm always really struck by how authors on that show talk about, "Well, I know you could see it as this." And I think that's a nice admission that you're putting something out there and you think that it's this, but you're also open to somebody else just seeing it as this other way.

I think this is a good time for me to mention the song on the record that was also on your EP that's a rendition of a song by Thundercat, "Captain Stupido." I didn't even know that was a rendition of a different song until someone told me and I thought it was so interesting. Then I listened to the original version and I was like, "Holy shit. They're so different." It feels like you interpreted it in a different way and now it's a new song. You made it so sad when the original version is just funky and weird. I just wanted to ask what really inspired you to change this song and make it your own?

I think that's something that I enjoy doing. I have a bunch of those kinds of demos stacked up too. I think of songs as in their most bare bones way, just lyrics and melody. I feel like when I really am getting into a song, I'm like one of those kids that always likes to take apart little machines to see how they're working. That's always been how I've listened to music. So making covers has always just been a fun thing that I'll do if I want to do some recording, but I don't feel particularly inspired to write.

And that Thundercat song… I like Thundercat a lot. I think that he's great. When I heard that song, I remember being really struck by the lyrics and thinking, "Wow, this is a pretty emo song, lyrically." I just thought it was great. It was so something I would want to write, but I would never have the confidence to write a line that's like, "Beat your meat and go to sleep." But I was so happy that somebody else did, so that I could sing it, but not have to fully own it in that way.

I actually wrote a couple songs with that lyric set, because I was like, "These chords are never going to be chords that I do." So I just took the lyrics and just started playing whatever other chord progressions I could find or come up with singing those lyrics. And it was easy, because there's so few lyrics. There's a lot of space for interpreting the melody. And it's funny, because the first attempt at doing that cover I did ended up becoming a song from the first EP called "Super Lotto," and I just had it as a Captain Stupido cover. Then I was like, "Eh, this should probably be an original," and then I wrote lyrics after. But then I came up with this new version of "Captain Stupido" and I was like, "Oh, this version is a cover," so then I just rolled with that. It's not a full cover, I guess. There's two lines that I had to add because it needed a bridge and there weren't any more lyrics to the song. So it's a little hybrid.

Could you not do a song without a bridge? Why did you feel the need to add a bridge?

I definitely am not a bridge person, in general. But I just thought in the form that I had, it just needed this little section that was going to lift it into the outro and there weren't any more words that I felt I could pull from. I had already repeated everything twice. So then I was just like, "All right. I'll just do two lines to try to make it reach the end."

One thing that I love about these songs is how it feels like they're all building up to something really big that ends up leading into the outro. Especially in "Ur Name on a Grain of Rice." It just gradually turns into this storm-like sound. I was wondering if that's something you aim for or if I'm just interpreting it that way.

I, definitely, think it is something that I aim for a lot at the time. Sometimes I try to lean away from that impulse. I think that at my core, when it comes to production, I might be somewhat of a maximalist, which works against my limited skills as an engineer and a mix person, because it can get hard. But I really have a soft spot for songs that I described as going to the moon. So I think when I'm really feeling it and if a song is just flowing as I'm writing it, it will naturally end up there. And "Ur Name on a Grain of Rice" is one of those songs that when I wrote it, it came pretty quickly, and without thinking I was just in my garage yelling that outro as I was writing it.

I've read you were trying to balance a hi-fi and a lo-fi sound, so I wanted to ask about that.

I really like meticulously organized music, like composed, orchestrated. And those two things are usually at odds because to make most lo-fi music, you have to inherently keep it simple or else it's just going to become a mess. So I feel like a lot of times making my songs is this balance of wanting to preserve enough warmth and also fully accepting my limitations, but I don't really know how to do any of this stuff officially. I'm just winging it at home. But then also I want to put seven saxophones on the song or something, and I can't do that in a true lo-fi way of recording it live to my phone. So it's always walking this boundary between the two.

When it comes to the lyrics, you seem more interested in posing questions than giving answers. I was wondering if you intentionally do that and if you do, why?

I do intentionally do that, and I think there are a couple reasons why. I think that I find it more interesting and I'm intentionally making space for a listener to bring themselves into a song. It's a pretty easy thing to do intentionally. I usually if I get to the end of a verse and I say something and it sounds too declarative or corny, I can be like, "If I rephrase that as a question," I think it becomes a lot more interesting. The other one is that I have a hard time claiming expertise or ownership over

anything. So it's also somewhat of a crutch for me to just be like, "I don't actually know about this. I'm just going to leave it as a question." I think somewhere between those things and there was a time a couple years ago where I felt like I was reading a lot of stuff that was posing a lot of questions and I found that more engaging as a reader too. So I was like, "Oh, this is something that I should do."

Noah Weinman Recommends:

A book: *Limber* by Angela Pelster

A piece of daily advice: get an alarm clock that isn't your phone

A tip for recording music: I constantly use stock samples and plugins in my music (I also use Ableton 9 and I'm pretty sure they're up to version 11), quality gear is obviously nice to have but don't get so hung up on it you can't create, use what you're comfortable with

A movie: *The Forty-Year-Old Version*

A song: "Giant" by the Bad Plus

<u>Name</u>
Noah Weinman

<u>Vocation</u>
Musician

<u>Fact</u>

Anania Bernal

Related to Musician Noah Weinman on making work to connect with the world around you:

Musician Jeremy Bolm on facing life through your art

Musician Tyler Bussey on learning about yourself through collaboration

Musician Domenic Palermo on completing and releasing creative work in difficult times

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by Kickstarter, PBC. See also: Terms, Privacy Policy.

↑