

On managing expectations



Producer and multi-instrumentalist Bibio discusses being self-taught, having a signature sound, and why he doesn't tour.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 3295 words.

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You're a self-taught musician. What freedoms has that brought you?

I'm not from a family of musicians. That's why I'm self-taught. From an early age I had this stubborn pride about being self-taught as well. It might have also been that I associated being tutored with school teachers that I generally didn't like and felt music was my thing that I enjoyed. School was this thing you had to do and was generally boring. You didn't understand why you had to do it, you just had to.

The first thing that came for me was messing around on an electronic keyboard, learning songs by ear— little melodies, usually the vocal melody of a song. I didn't think this was anything special because it made sense to me, but my parents made me aware that this might be some kind of talent. I assumed that everybody could do it. I still do actually, it's just a matter of trying.

Guitar came along maybe about the age of 11, 12. I didn't have any lessons, but at the time someone taught me a few chords, got me started. There was this stubborn pride that I didn't want lessons. Maybe because I didn't know anybody who was into what I was into. I imagined lessons would be with someone out of touch with what I was into and therefore didn't want any formal training. I still don't, really. I'd still rather learn from people who I connect with musically over an academic approach.

There are only so many hours in a day. You've got to choose your way of learning. For me, it's always been this hybrid approach of music and production as one. There was a natural curiosity for recording when I was a child. I discovered this technique on my mom's karaoke machine that had a twin cassette deck. Plugged my guitar straight into it, recorded a chord pattern that I came up with then swapped the tapes over, played what I just recorded, dubbed it onto the new tape.

I could play over the top of it at the same time. I don't know whether it was designed to do that. Just an inherent feature. I kept swapping the tapes over, repeating the process. I was actually doing crude multi-tracking. This was early to mid '90s. There was no decent equipment available to me. It was me using my imagination with this karaoke machine to create more tracks. This gave me the power to create things, make it sound a bit like a band, even though it was just a guitar.

That was the start of the interest in multi-tracking for me. I didn't have anything else to do it with. Later on when I was at university and still didn't have a computer, I used MiniDiscs exactly the same way, two MiniDisc recorders and a headphone splitter to record from one disc and simultaneously play at the same time. What happens in both cases is that it degrades each time you're making a copy of a copy. The first things you put down are the murkiest, the most recent is the cleanest. That is what led to my early signature sound with cassette.

Do you keep the end listener in mind when writing?

In a sense I do. As I've put out more work and am aware that people listen to my music and say nice things about it, it's hard to not think of an audience, to be completely removed from that. Of course you don't know who these people are. Because my catalog is quite varied, I've got a broad range of people that listen to my music. They don't necessarily listen to all of it. They might cherry pick their favorites. I get excited about the people I know will connect with what I do and look forward to seeing some of their reactions, because I do read comments occasionally. That part feels like the point in a way, especially for someone that doesn't play live. I don't have an audience cheering at me because I don't go on stage. This makes up for that in a way.

What is your approach to using field recordings?

The kind of field recording I like doing is weather and spaces. It's hard to get away from the sound of traffic. Obviously traffic includes people driving with their radios or talking on the phone on their hands free thing and you can hear them. All of that can jolt you out of a dream state, depending on how it's used, of course. I'm not saying the sound of traffic has no place in field recording, just that I'm trying to get away from that because I'm often trying to achieve some kind of purity of the sound of nature, even if it's something mundane like the sound of wind. It's so hard to get away from noise pollution.

When I do use field recordings, generally it's something I've recorded myself. I could just search the internet for libraries of field recordings but that doesn't connect with why I do it in the first place. There's a parallel interest with photography. I like to go out and do it myself. Using field recordings in music can add atmosphere and texture, but can sound out of place as well. There's an art to selecting the right thing, the right level that it's mixed in. Otherwise it can sound a bit like a relaxation, meditation, ambient thing. You want it to be more haunting or thought provoking.

How do you keep track of your ideas?

I'm not very organized, but I play guitar every day, even if it's a small amount. The one thing that's always in my pocket is my phone. If I come up with a riff that I like the sound of and think, "Oh that's got potential..." Those things tend to happen where you're just messing around, not trying, they just come out. The first thing I do is get my phone, prop it up against something, and make a video of me playing. I use alt tunings on guitar quite a lot-what's happened in the past when I've listened to a demo and wanted to remake it is I couldn't remember what tuning it was in. It's taken hours to try, you think you've got it, then there's this ridiculous contortionist hand shape, you thought that that can't be right, so it must be a different tuning. The thing you must remember to always do is record the open strings first on the video so you can hear what tuning it's in. I've got hundreds of videos on my phone that are riffs, might be four chords, might be two chords, might be a little pattern. The other thing that's useful about them being in video format is that the thumbnail is me sitting down with a guitar.

I remember "Curls." When I came up with that riff, I was sitting on my bed with a mahogany acoustic guitar, recorded the sketch, then carried on with whatever else I was doing. It might have been months, even a year before I came back to it. I remembered that that's where it was and could go back and learn what I played. It was really useful as a sketch pad.

What's your take on having contrast between albums vs a "signature" sound?

I admire people who do one thing and do it well just as much as people who can do a variety. There are different perspectives on variety. If you are a pianist and all you record is piano, all you compose with is piano, you've got to listen to it as somebody's output or their discography in the context that this is the instrument they play. You can't accuse it of all sounding the same because that's the chosen discipline. The variety is in the music itself, the choice of notes, the emotions. The variety in my music is also the genre and the production, how the music is dressed up.

Music that can be sung and played on a traditional musical instrument can be dressed up in countless ways. If you imagine The Beatles, they're still one of my main influences, not musically, but in terms of the variety they had on their albums and the juxtapositions between tracks. It was incredible. Even when I listen to things like *Sgt.*

Pepper's now I think how daring it would still be to put those tracks next to each other completely unrelated in genre.

That inspires me to be more daring with what I put next to each other on an album. When I did Ambivalence Avenue, I was apprehensive that people might think this sounds like a compilation album. There was a certain amount of self-consciousness that people are going to think this doesn't work as an album. It's too many different things. It was the opposite. It was well received because of that. That also reflects modern times, the world we live in now.

Even fairly mainstream hip hop sounds like it's informed by lots of different channels, rather than being traditionalist. It's easy to get away with it in the 21st century. When I was a teenager, it was all about choosing your tribe and being almost patriotic to it. I was into metal, so I couldn't like other bands, it would've been somehow treason. When I got older I let my guard down, allowed myself to like other things. I don't know whether teenagers are like that now. Maybe they have less reason to choose a tribe and be stuck to it.

What do you do when you're feeling stuck?

If I'm working on a particular track and I'm not particularly into what I'm doing or not sure what to do next, the natural thing is to have a break, just do something else. I have lots of tracks I'm working on at the same time. That's changed over the years because I've got all these sketches on my phone as well.

I never treat anything as a reject, I never delete anything. It's just a matter of when I'm ready to work on it again. Having this huge archive of unreleased, unfinished music, I can dip into any of it if I don't feel like starting something new. It's good to remind myself that I shouldn't pressure myself into coming up with new ideas all the time. Sometimes there's gems in there that just need watering and giving some TLC. The last track on the album, "Fools", was one of those. It was just a sketch.

Probably over 95% of my songs start on guitar, excluding the piano stuff on Phantom Brickworks, which is all improvised. If I was to do the romantic thing of going off to rural France like the painters used to do and shut themselves off in the world, I'd have to take a guitar and a recording device because I know most ideas come through the guitar. Even if they end up getting converted to synth or some other instrument, the guitar is where they're born.

Your success provides a counter to the "artists must tour" narrative. What's your relationship to live performance?

In the past, certain people have gently goaded me and criticized my excuses for not doing it, as if I'm covering something up. Getting to the point of, "Are you just afraid to do it?" I'm very honest about that now, about stage fright and feeling uncomfortable performing. In the past I've felt you couldn't talk about those things. You couldn't give that impression that you don't want to do it because you seem ungrateful or you don't want people to know you have stage fright. I don't really care about that now. I'm more comfortable, because I'm making a living from doing this, that I don't need to do that. Currently I don't need to do that. I don't need to tour.

This is where my interest is, it's in the studio, it's recording. Not only does touring take up time to do, it takes up a lot of time to prepare for. I've had little experience of that. As I've grown, my music has grown with me. This new album, yes, it could be done as a live band, but I wouldn't know where to start. Getting the right people, the rehearsal, adapting it so it works. All of that is unknown to me. It's not what occupies my mind, what occupies my mind is creating music in a studio. If I was to put together a band and try and make the live thing happen, I don't feel like I'd be doing it for me. I'd be doing it out of expectation or to please people.

If it's taken up my time, it's taken me away from the studio. It's taking me away from writing new music. The longest I go without doing something creative is going away on holiday for a week. Even then I've been known to take equipment with me. Now I tend to see it as a holiday, but at least an opportunity to take photographs. As soon as I get home, I'm jumping back in. There's not enough time to do all the things I want to do. Why would I take up more time doing something I don't want to do?

Expectations are tough.

People have said to me, "Oh, but people want to see you." That's a privileged position to be in, that people want to see you. There's almost this guilt element that you should be doing it because you can, you've got this opportunity, you should take it. One analogy I draw to help people understand is you wouldn't expect a film actor to go on stage and be a stage actor or a film director to be a theatrical director. They're two different worlds. People get into one because that's their passion. For me, the live thing is like theater. What I do is more like a film director because it's all about piecing things together. Live music is not my thing. It's not what I do. What I do is recording.

I sympathize with people that struggle with what they feel that they should be doing as opposed to what they want to be doing. That's what life does to you. People do that, society does that. I'm not a hugely confident person, but I've gained confidence through recognition of what I do, and also have this sense of security with it.

Sometimes I have this fantasy that I am the kind of person that likes to play live. I grew up listening to rock bands, my heroes were rock stars. Now that it's a reality, I realize it's not me. I'd have to be a different person to do it. That's how I justify it. I'd have to have a different personality. People have said to me, oh yeah, you get used to it, you get over the fear.

It's not just that, the incentive isn't there. The incentive to record music is the reward of having created music and albums. I respect people who love live music. I know there are bands who prefer the stage to the studio, they find the studio a pain in the ass. I can't relate to that directly, but I can relate to the principle of it.

Bibio Recommends:

Drink: Baladin Nora—I love beer, and there's a lot of amazing beer in the world. The craft beer explosion has made hoppy IPAs commonplace and flavorsome beers in cans with wacky graphics has become the norm, this is hardly a bad thing, but the trend has also saturated the market with beers that are somewhat alike. Baladin is a small company in Italy and they produce beers as well as other drinks. I first tried Baladin Nora in my local Italian restaurant and it stopped me in my tracks; I honestly can't remember the last time a beer made such an impact on my taste buds. It's a spiced beer, but don't let that put you off, this isn't some generic beer with cinnamon thrown in, in fact I wouldn't have guessed it was spiced, it just tastes unique and incredible. Apparently myrrh is one of the ingredients!

Place: Kohgen World, Ginza, Tokyo—As well as appreciating exotic flavors, I'm also a fan of exotic smells. A passion for perfume led me to learning about and collecting perfume ingredients, and that led me to incense ingredients and aromatic oils and woods. This then led to my love of Japanese incense. One year I was in Japan to play a show, and in my spare time I went to check out this shop called Kohgen World in Ginza. It's not a very big shop but it's filled with hundreds of different types of Japanese incense—upstairs you can find sandalwood beads and a sculpture made of agarwood, and drawers full of exotic spices and aromatic materials. I must admit, I got rather emotional and overwhelmed, you can't find anything like this in the UK, or possibly outside of Japan, as it specializes in Japanese incense products.

Food: Bare Bone Chocolate—On the taste/smell theme, my girlfriend discovered this small chocolate producer from Glasgow, Scotland. I've never tried chocolate as refined and interesting as this before; there's just so much more going on in their chocolate, which is produced bean-to-bar, meaning they start with the raw cacao beans and end up with a finished bar of chocolate. It's really special, like a chocolate equivalent of a fine single malt whisky.

Comedy: Limmy (Brian Limmond)—Staying with Glasgow again, Brian Limmond AKA Limmy, is a comedian, except not like in any traditional sense of the word. He did a TV show for BBC Scotland, which was a kind of mad sketch show, but he started out years ago with DIY camcorder sketches which he posted online (some of my favorite things of his were DIY things). I've been a fan for many years and seen him grow from DIY sketches to a more professionally produced TV show and then back to homemade stuff. I don't think any comedian has made me laugh as hard as Limmy has. Check out his improv stories on YouTube/Twitch. He's very prolific and uploads a lot of content (and his fans upload clips too), a lot of it is just him gaming (but often being funny whilst doing it), but one of his

talents is taking a prompt from a fan and improvising a daft story from it. There's nobody like him, he's bonkers.

TV Show and soundtrack: **Life on Earth by David Attenborough** (1979)– This aired just over a month after I was born. I developed a love of nature and nature documentaries at a young age, and a lot of it was thanks to David Attenborough documentaries. He's in his 90s now and is still narrating, and his documentaries have got increasingly impressive in their cinematic footage. But this particular series from 1979 still stands out for me, it discusses the origins and evolution of life and goes into more scientific depth than a lot of the more recent documentaries. A truly inspiring body of work, one worth going back to but one that many might not have seen. This recommendation is really 2 in 1, as Life on Earth also has a wonderful soundtrack by Edward Williams, which is available on multiple formats.

Name

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Vocation

musician and producer

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Matt Peers