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October 22, 2021 -

As told to Elle Nash, 2561 words.

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On learning from what you create

Writer and musician Ben Fama discusses the value of one-syllable words, asking questions and expressing desires, meditating when you're already in a good place, and avoiding burnout via multi-tasking.

One thing that's really nice about pop music, to me, is that it feels like it's a place of fantasy. It's an acceptable place to explore the kind of feelings that are usually looked down upon as too sincere, or maybe cringe, or vulnerable. Maybe we take something as cringey because it's a vulnerable thing. What does it mean to you in terms of creating that kind of music?

What you were just saying about the earnestness or simple presentation of it, that seems to un-guard it, that it's kind of cringey...The appeal, to me, is that a finely crafted thing doesn't really show the traces of how it's made. In pop, a very catchy line will make a great chorus, a line that you can say again and again. That's kind of what I was going for with "Tell Me What to Do." I like one-syllable words a lot. I use those a lot in poems and titles of things. They are a perfect unit to generate meaning in music and language.

It's interesting. In the total fantasy that pop lets you step into, it reveals the bad things in your life, as well. If you have a creamsicle sounding '60s type of song, like Mamas and the Papas, it sounds the way a soft serve ice cream tastes; we wouldn't need that place to go if there weren't the opposite of bad things happening in our life just as easily. In my songs, I want to explore the super dark side of life in general, culture. But also in the unconscious mind and in our drives. So often these songs are about love, but the death drive is a part of the drive towards love and the destruction of the self.

You said the death drive is a part of the drive towards love?

I think so. There's just the agony of eros. Often, we look for people that reflect back things about ourselves that we like to think about. We find people that reflect back the parts of ourselves that we like to present, and it represses more of our unconscious, dark stuff that I think also deprives us and wants us dead, in a way. The "Date With The Night" song you mentioned is a cryptic thrash song. On all my songs, I want that very specific texture, that sort of garage thrash: slamming into the wall, busted light bulbs, falling on the garage floor, glass everywhere. That aesthetic is very appealing to me, because that seems closer to the energies that drive people towards love than what's on the radio. But I think both are important.

One feels like the actual experience of it, and the other is more like the fantasy of it?

Yeah. The reality of things is either very unremarkable, or sad and tragic. At the end of the pop song, you end happy, but if that song went on longer it would be sad. Relationships fall apart, people die. Reality de-sublimates at the surface and things usually don't work out, or worse. People reveal things about themselves that they usually would not let you know in relationships with other people. When you listen to pop music from that perspective, I think it becomes a lot more fascinating.

You start to see them more realistically, maybe, which can sometimes actually be pretty tragic.

I feel like the truth of most people is tragedy. Not as a flaw, just as people. As creatures who have to contend with other people's behaviors, and our own behaviors and moral decisions. I think we're often in a Sisyphean struggle. Through no fault of our own, often, we make bad decisions or hurt people or fail at things. I don't think it's something that is to be faulted in people, I think it's something to be accepted.

When you're putting together music, what does that do for your mental state? How did it affect the rest of your art or the rest of your life, and how you were experiencing your life while you were heavily in this project?

I see my Bebby Doll musician moniker makes mention of fantasy and death, which my first two books, the themes are very much the same. Contemporary textures, desire with the logic of capital, sex. The artifice of BDSM. I would say I'm more interested in how that has been aestheticized, than actual BDSM stuff. In music you can give emotional information outside of words. It is cultural, what chord progressions and keys, tempos, all that stuff, what emotions it pulls forth. But there's so much you can amalgamate from, this song is going to be fast and the vocals are going to sound like this, the guitar is going to sound like this. You crack the song, sort of.

Do you work on the lyrics first?

No. I always will have a melody, at least, and then start doing the lyrics. Then I find the part of the lyrics I like, and it works with the music. It's like, "What is this lyric? What have I revealed to myself?" Then I will build it out and cut out the other lyrics that don't really fit. I like the song to cohere as a unit.

"Tell Me What To Do" is a very subby, bubble gum pop song, I would say. Where it's like you want to please the other. You've thrown your sword in the sand and you're just begging them to tell you what to do to make them happy. It's not necessarily, a desperate attempt. There's a part that's, "A splendor on my knees and the grass, is that too much to ask?" I really like the film, A Splendor In The Grass. It's a lot about repressed sexual drives. I realized that song was sort of about asking the question, either to god or the lover. I want to get what I want, and part of that is for you to get what you want, so tell me what to do to both get what we want, and create that harmony.

I've been thinking about that a lot, what it means to ask the question in general. I think it's relating to what it means to express the desire. To express a desire kind of starts to fulfill it a little bit.

Like manifestation in a way.

I don't know. Having a conversation about something you want will make you feel better than you did before. I think that there is pleasure in just being able to express the desire, even if it ends in a no.

In the same way, I think that asking a question, whether it's an intense philosophical question or a more heady, harder to answer question starts to help you understand what the answer might be. Asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" That will get you closer to the answer than not asking.

Even by asking the question, it begins a process of analysis, maybe even self-analysis.

For sure. That's the next step you have to do is think, "Why do I want to know this?" Then you're off. I think you know from other things, I'm into antinatalism. All quarantine, I'd say, my two polar, transcendental schools of thought are antinatalism and Simone Weil. Simone Weil is a Christian mystic, even though she was Jewish and never really converted to Catholicism.

Antinatalism is, I'd say, very godless. You kind of have to not believe in immortal life as one of the premises that the bad outweighs the good. Therefore, to bring someone into a situation where they're going to have more bad things in their life is unethical. If you believe they're going to go to Heaven afterwards, forever, I think that would be justifiable. Antinatalism doesn't really believe in transcendent things like that.

They do believe that helping people becomes a purpose once you're alive. It's funny, because I think a lot of religious people say the same thing, even though their final conclusions about the meaning of life is the same, but the reason why is different.

Simone Weil has a much different sense of transcendental values. She was very political and she has this sense that the bigger imagination you have about what god might be like, the farther you are from god. That is too much of your own self. I think that's why there's a beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit." As she even says, "An atheist could get closer to god because they have less idea of how that might be," in existence. So, to ask the question of what god might be like is getting closer to the answer. Expressing desire fulfills the desire a little bit. Tell me what to do, if you're throwing that question out, whatever might be listening, you might start to find the answer.

When you're doing music or when you were creating or composing these songs, versus when you are writing a poem, which one do you feel gets closer to your approximation of what's in your head that you're putting in the world?

I think with most art, even if you think you might know what it's going to be when it's done, it kind of has its own life that it takes on once you start. You have to honor that as you're creating, and learn.

This applies more to poetry for me. I've been working on a poem for like, three months. I always try to start with a title, but sometimes as it goes on, I realize the title is not appropriate anymore and it needs a different title. For music, I think for whatever reason, for me, if I can get it how I hear it in my head then it's perfect. It's so beautiful. But it usually doesn't change as much as you fill the song out. Surprising things can happen when you're messing around in the studio, or recording or throwing down

demos and stuff, and you know what accidents to keep. It's harder for a totally new thing to show up, at least for me and the song. I do love experimenting with sounds and sound design. I guess, in the poem, for me, is more when the unconscious will guide my hand as work. There's so few steps between the thought and the word.

All during this past year, you've put out stuff with Glass, the band, and then you did this solo project. What was the difference for you in working in these two separate areas?

Glasssss has Niina Pollari, who has a new book coming out on Soft Skull. She's a really incredible singer, amazing vocalist, and a true genius, freak person. It's kind of the same thing of wanting her intuitions involved. Matt Roar who is a teacher, a skater, a surfer, also a writer, and he did drums in a lot of other stuff. Those kinds of collaborations are very satisfying, but it's all about letting go. That's a jangler project. I see Bebbly Doll as very much the night inside of the night kind of project that is very dirty. The drums are drum machine, run through, dirty filters. I love those textures, and I know it doesn't sound high-end necessarily, but that doesn't bother me.

For Glasssss, I wanted that to sound as good as possible because there were so many people involved. I kind of regret never learning studio recording, because I think that would be a really fun day job to help bands record their songs.

Do you ever feel like, while you were working on these projects, especially through the pandemic, that you got burnout at all?

It freaked me out. Working through burnout is the worst thing. I think, for me, it's the day after day after day, the same, undifferentiated environment and routine that has really burnt me out. But I did writing for so long, switching to music kind of was a way of procrastinating on writing stuff, and also no one gave a shit if I was working on music. My agent is waiting for me to finish my novel, but not a damn soul is waiting for me to record a song. That, in and of itself, made it appealing, I think. I escaped burnout that way.

Also, I put on a lot of events with my press, Wonder. I started a reading series in quarantine called Club Wonder that I now co-curate with Ted Dodson, who is a Wonder author who has a great new book out called An Orange. It's held online and it was just so good because you could just see people in California and the UK, just for an hour. You'd see people's faces, wave and say, "Hi." Even in-person readings, you can't see that many different people that are important to you in your life. I also watched a lot of movies on Criterion and a lot of movies where God doesn't speak back to the people who were crying out for help. I'm not sure if that actually helped my burnout at all. I'm not actually not sure why I even mentioned that. It's one thing I did a lot last winter.

Just to help you get through it?

I don't know. What do you do when you're burned out?

When things are really bad, I read Buddhist texts or articles from monks to help reframe my perspective. That helps. I think that helps a lot, but I don't know if it's successful or not, because I haven't worked on my own projects in a couple of months.

People talk about meditation all the time, but what meditation gives us is realizing it's totally fine if we're not working on our projects. It's not good or bad, it's very natural and it's okay. It's not something that you need to do something about.

I think that's really true.

Someone who I've tried to become friends with in quarantine, just because we did talk about meditation some, was Liturgy, which is a Hunter Hunt-Hendrix project. She's taught me so much about meditation. She talks about when things are good, nurturing that inner stuff, too. Often, we're in a very stressed state. Desperation and meditation are something we always put together, but when things are good and you meditate, they stay really good. She taught me that, so I want to give her a little shout out. You're still living in your ego to want to do those things. The problem is, I'm the problem in those situations. I'm the one who feels wanting for something or lacking when I'm stuck. To want those problems to be gone, it's like I'm still inserting myself as the actor who's trying to fix something. It's usually by taking an action, I can make it worse rather than just accepting that it's not going the way I wanted in that moment.

Ben Fama Recommends:

Robert Bresson Au Hazard Balthazar (1966)

Nathanial Dorsky's "Devotional Cinema" essay.

Dennis Harte "Summer's Over" song.

James Frazer's encyclopedic The Golden Bough

Kenneth Anger's "Lucifer" tattoo

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