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consumer zero

music images text

consumer

The interviews in this publication have been changed in some ways from their original transcripts. These changes were only made to adjust syntax that seemed confusing or misleading when the oral interviews were transcribed to text. A deliberate effort was made to ensure that these changes did not distort the meaning of the interviewee's responses.

The cover uses quotation marks for album titles solely for its design merit. In the rest of the magazine, we have stylized according to the common standard of using quotation marks for song titles and italics for album or release titles.

If you come across any musical terminology you don't understand while reading, please refer to the glossary on page 46.

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Alarmist is a band from Dublin, Ireland that plays beautifully complex, yet effortlessly fluid instrumental music. Despite citing a handful of influences, their musical style remains entirely unique. Alarmist comfortably welds together energetic bursts of shimmering staccato guitar leads, morose keyboard lines, and roomy drum grooves with contrasting regressions of introspective synth-work and airy wistful asides. Guitars roar as the harmonics of overblown reverb bleed through on huge melodic releases and then subside down into stuttering rhythmic phrases, only to edge into a sweet-sounding display of daintiness and inquisition moments later. Most remarkably of all, these seemingly impulsive shifts of direction never confuse the listener, and instead resonate as graceful and imposingly convincing within minutes of your first listen.

More often than not, the success of this sound depends on a symbiotic back and forth connection that exists between each instrument. The triumph of every melody strongly emphasizes a sense of unanimous interdependence, as the layers of percussion, guitars, keyboards, and electronics all find a way to play off of each other and cooperate in delivering a single message. In the same way, this constant interplay of voices indicates a willful intent behind every detail in the arrangement. Even the rhythmic flairs of each player manage to find an accord when aligned with one another. Regardless of their discrete precision, these structures of syncopation work like glue, bringing every bit of Alarmist's sonic array into delicate congruency.

In February, we spoke with Alarmist's Barry O'Halpin to talk about the dynamics of the band and the process of creating their first full-length record, *Popular Demain*, which was released on November 2, 2015, two years after their sophomore release, the *Pal Magnet* EP, and four years after their debut self-titled EP.

consumerzero: Can you explain the different roles that each of you have in the band? Across all of your music, there is quite an extensive spread of instrumentation. Who does what? What are the responsibilities?

Barry [Alarmist]: If you were to look at things just from our live setup, Elis and I both play guitars and keys, then there's Osgar on drums, and, up until recently, there was Neil who played the third keyboard and second drum kit. So, we basically have a three-keyboard, two-drum kit, two-guitar, setup with a lot of additional sample triggering between Elis and I. We jump between instruments all the time, but Elis's strength is more towards keyboards and mine is more towards guitar, so it's very interchangeable in that way.

That's our live setup, but then on the record, it's more of an open book, because I think we are a band that

really enjoys the recording process, layering things up. Especially on this record, *Popular Demain*, there were some songs where we had ideas for how they would sound in the end that we hadn't been able to reach fully in the rehearsal rooms. It was cool to be able to remove ourselves from the responsibilities of the live setup when we were recording. There's a lot of sharing of responsibilities and swapping around in that environment.

cz: How did you guys meet each other and how was the band formed?

A: Elis, Osgar, and myself have been playing music together on and off for over a decade, since we were teenagers. I grew up with those guys, so it goes way back. We started our own little band years ago and basically just played through shitty incarnations of it for a while. But then, I'd say about eight years ago, the actual Alarmist, as it is now, formed. This was when Neil joined the band; I started jamming with him after we had been in a bit of a break from one of the old bands with the other two guys. I put up an ad and so Neil had joined from that on the basis of mutual music interests. We regrouped as a four piece, started writing, and, I think, from the very start, we wanted to do something that combined a lot of our influences. We'd been a kind of instrumental band since we were seventeen or eighteen, playing post-rock influenced stuff and then, when we got back together, we wanted to use a lot more samples and electronics and broaden out the influences that we could integrate. Neil was studying jazz drumming and Elis and I were in college studying composition and music in a more classical sense, but we were into all sorts of music. Osgar was going off to study drums as well, so we were all learning and studying music and had lots of different angles to come at it from.

We released the first EP in 2011, so it took us a few years even to get around to releasing stuff, but we were recording a lot of that material in the couple of years beforehand. And that first EP is basically the first few years of Alarmist ideas finally coming together.

cz: Your group has a very specific sound to it. Do you think it came organically from you guys being together and playing for that long, or was there more of a deliberate and focused effort into achieving this certain style?

A: I think it's quite organic. It really came from our shared interests, the influences of the band, especially bands that kind of blended post-rock, jazz, and electronic elements like Tortoise, Jaga Jazzist, and Mice Parade. Those are probably the easiest people to compare it to at the time that we knew, and they were big influences on us, but there were also so many others. It was the heavy percussion textures and multiple drummers that was definitely the influence in the early days. However, we weren't trying to emulate a particular sound. I think we all developed a pretty organic idea of what we wanted to do from what we had. I feel like we never really contrived it or had to really stop ourselves from going in one direction. We gravitated towards what we are doing now very naturally.

You can kind of hear that if you listen back to the other EP's. The earlier stuff is a bit more raw, in the room sounding, and I think we were always pushing towards a really big sound, a slightly-beyond-our-means kind of sound. That's why we got into a lot of multitasking live, swapping around guitars and keyboards, sometimes playing both at the same time. A lot of that evolved from trying to get to that bigger sound with lots of moving parts and different colors. The guitar tapping on your left hand and playing keys with your right hand a lot of that sort of stuff we do has no basis in, like, "Ooh, that would be cool and flashy and very technical." It always came from, "Let's try to get this very multi-faceted, dense sound with lots of different lines, and try to do all of it with just the four of us." That's why we had Neil playing both the drums and keyboards, because being swapping around enabled us to have this big palette of different textures, electronic and live, at our disposal. Especially on *Popular Demain*, we have quite a big sound on that album and I think, in a way,

it's like a culmination of what we were always trying to pull off live, what'd we'd been inspired to do by our influences.

cz: How was the process of making this record different from your two previous EP's?

A: Well, even though some of the ideas and elements of the songs go years and years back, the full songs only really came together in the two years before we recorded, and that's actually a lot quicker than the way it happens with the EP's, because the EP's were really made from a slow development of songs that we were forming as a band over the years. We were all in college and busy with other stuff. People were moving away and living in different cities and it slowed things down, so there was a very long gestation period with the EP's songs. When I look back on them, I think a lot more of them were composed together in the room. We would always share ideas to help build the skeleton of a song and then work on them together, but I think there was more of an on-the-spot writing approach, especially in the first EP. As we developed, it became more of the kind of thing where people would bring in a demo of a song that was already somewhat complete, and then we would structure it together and add little bits and lines. I think *Popular Demain* was much more lenient that way. The songs were easier to separate into the processes of someone making a demo and then all of us coming together to work it out, adding little variations and twists to that material. There was a lot more demoing that happened, a lot more sitting back and thinking about the song and how it should go, rather than jamming in a room. We did a lot less of that for *Popular Demain.* Each of us contributes material, but it works best if we have time to kind of develop it on our own and then bring it in, record us trying to play it, and then take that away and come up with even more ideas. I think demoing has become a really important part of the process.

With *Popular Demain*, a lot of the songs were complete to some extent before we brought them in, but there were a few where we left space for a bit more studio layering, especially the last track "Cordillera." We kind of knew we wanted to make it sound really big at the end and do something we hadn't done before, really layering up these dirty, epic sounding synths and messing around with arpeggiators. We had the guts of the material, but a lot of that was us having fun in the studio, just trying things out, and a lot of the stuff we came up with on the spot over the existing structure stayed on there. It was the same with "Lost Console." We had vague ideas of what we wanted to do, but we didn't really have that song as a live performance, we just had the basic material. I had a demo of it, and then we went in and all shared ideas and started trying out different synths. Osgar was playing brushes on the piano and Elis was playing muted piano notes and creating percussive layers. It was fun to be more creative on the spot in the studio, but that's a neat part of all of the songs to some extent.

cz: On *Popular Demain*, where did the balance sit between demoing and bringing things in to jam together on?

A: It has become less and less jam based. I think the jamming stage is what happens after the idea has come in and been absorbed. For instance, there are some songs where I would have demoed most of it out and had three or four sections that were really there. Maybe the drums weren't fully fleshed out, but I'm not a drummer so I don't really bring in complete drum lines, maybe just ideas. Anyhow, most of the arrangement with the melodies was there and we all listened to it, trying to learn how to play it. Then, we structure things differently and add variations, each putting our own flavor of things into it. I would have done that with songs like "Petrichor" and "Morning, Kepler," where I brought them in and then we would all add our bit to it and it would become more of a group thing. Elis brought in "CGI Sky," which was mostly pre-composed by him. We learned it as a group and made little structural divisions, but that was mostly his song. Neil contributed a lot of the main core of "Safarisogood" and "Cordillera" and then that would fuse with little ideas and riffs that we had ourselves. It's a group thing and we argue into the ground about how things should go, until you lose all sense of individual ownership, but everyone brings in ideas and demos at different stages.

And we just split hairs for ages really, just trying to find ways to match this riff with that riff, match that thing Elis or I had with that phrase that Neil had, and find a way to stick it on top of each other. It's a slow process a lot of the time, but sometimes when someone has a whole demo they've brought in pre-composed, it clicks into place very quickly because we know, okay, learn the parts, maybe mess with the structure a little, but generally, it's all there. So, it really depends on the song. Jamming is usually our way of going, "We need something interesting to happen on top of what's here, let's try variations or change things up a bit."

Back to demoing, when it comes to the rhythm

parts, Osgar's main task is drumming, writing a lot of drum material and beats. That's just generally his area, unless one of us has a very specific drum idea that we bring in as well. But also, Neil is a really accomplished drummer himself, even though Osgar's kind of the main drummer. We call them lead and rhythm drummers jokingly. On *Popular Demain* in particular, Neil actually wrote some really cool double drum kit beats and you can hear them on "Safarisogood" and "Cordillera."

cz: That was one of my later questions. I was wondering if I was really hearing two drum kits?

A: That's right. We are the bane of sound engineers on small stages because we've always played with two drum kits. But admittedly, it's always been very cool having that extra element of double percussion.

cz: From my impression so far, things tend to take a while in the writing process. Is there ever any sentiment that you wish you could get something done really quickly, just so that it doesn't stay in that "allowed to change" spot for too long? How do you feel about having things hang on for as long as they do?

A: That's a good question, because a lot of our songs went through that. There's material and little ideas in *Popular Demain* that I know we first tinkered around with maybe five years ago. On one hand, you kind of want to just get certain things out of your system, but then on others you'd think, "Well, if we'd made that a song four years ago we wouldn't have used that other material here and made this much better song." I guess it's the perfectionist tendency to hold on to everything until you think that it is totally perfect, but it's never going to be perfect. It is quite refreshing to just get on with it when you have the opportunity, like when you have a song where you think, "Okay, this is going to be a raw kind of song, a real short, simple song," and you know what to do with it and just move on. With "Last Console," it was arranged and structured and we already knew we'd add this thing and this thing, and then we'll just fuck around in the studio and add a few extra bits. Even though that song had been sitting around as a demo for a few years, not really going anywhere, it hadn't been changed. It was just an opportunity to release it. But yeah, I think we're getting better at getting things finished a little quicker.

cz: It's tough in the short term, but is that also what makes it rewarding in the end?

A: Yeah, exactly. One thing that I find rewarding is when I listen to the album, or even our EP's, and I hear bits, melodies, and ideas that are so old to me I thought they were going to sit in the shelf forever. But eventually they find a home, and you see people on Bandcamp, or wherever, getting into it and you realize that that little tune found a place after all, and someone really enjoyed it. That is always a nice thing to see.

cz: What was the recording process like for *Popular Demain*? What engineer did you work with and how did the affair go?

A: It was really great actually, a really enjoyable process, because we recorded *Popular Demain* and *Pal Magnet* in a studio in County Wicklow, which is just outside of Dublin, called The Meadow. It's run by the engineer Rían Trench, who plays in a couple of really great bands, namely Solar Bears. He's just got an incredible setup back there, so many old vintage synths, amps, and other analog gear. It has the whole unusual retro guitar workshop upstairs, so we can always just try out some weird discontinued 1970's guitar that looks like someone cut it out of cardboard, but has a very distinctive sound. It's a place where you can really play around with sounds and mess around with nice gear in a really nice setting in the countryside. It's always a really enjoyable process, because you look forward to being there, with all of the natural light coming in. If you're bored, you can just go look at some squirrels outside. It's a really relaxed atmosphere and I think we valued that in the last two recordings, because we'd hate to have had to do it in a dark basement studio where you're just counting down the hours until you can leave. We got along really well with Rían personally and musically. He's just got a great ear and ability to pick up on what gear will sound cool for a particular bit or particular song; he can tune in really well. It really suits us as a band, because I think we gravitate towards a lot of analog and slightly retro sounding synth sounds, getting that kind of worbly gritty warmth. That's something we were really able to achieve in that studio.

cz: Is it fair to say you spent a lot of time there experimenting with things that you weren't sure you'd end up going somewhere with or not?

A: I think yes and no. In some sense, we always have a good idea of what we need to do in the studio, but we leave room for a little bit of experimentation. We'll usually get down the essentials of the song first, all of the live stuff, those are the most important things. We always try and get a live take in. Even though we have a lot of electronics, synths, and samples, we are very keen on having things sound somewhat organic and not too bound to a click, whenever possible. Then, once we've laid down the essential parts, we add lots of overdubs to reinforce what is there, but we don't tend to add more to the arrangement than we initially intended. We usually explore the different sounds that are there, mix and match, bring some sounds in, leave others out, and generally be a bit more subtle with the sounds than we are able to be live. You can hear that on a lot of the songs, where we add little touches of orchestration or arranging ideas, that brightens it up in a way that you just can't pull off live with only four people. But we try to do it in such way that the songs don't suffer when you play them live. The interesting part of that is that once you've recorded a song, even when we've been trying it out at gigs, we'll always bring new elements back into the live arrangement and update the samples and patches that we're playing with, which enrich the live show even more. A little bit of experimentation when everything else is out of the way makes a lot of sense.

cz: Fundamentals first?

A: And then controlled experimentation. A little bit of controlled chaos is always good.

cz: Something I'm fascinated by is that you guys mixed all of your records yourselves and they sound really good, which is somewhat rare to see with a band. With electronic acts, it's a bit more common, but you don't see it nearly as much with more live-based musicians. Are any of you particularly skilled in that field or have you always just been interested in experimenting and persevering through controlling that process on your own?

A: Yeah, I think a bit of both. The need to mix our own stuff is a consequence of the fact that there are so many layers in the music and that we're all finicky about the sound quality. A lot of the touches we add in the

studio are little subtleties that we can't represent as well live, so we like to get it really right in the recording. There will be a lot of automation of little ideas or mixing challenges when there are a lot of layers. In a way, it's hard to entrust that sometimes to someone who doesn't know the ins and outs of the song structure. I know I'm sure we could find incredible engineers to mix it much better than we ever could, but at the same time, as a group of composers/arrangers, it's quite hard to let go and get something back without thinking they didn't bring up the bass at the right time, or that they didn't change that synth sound to a slightly different one at this point, or whatever, so that's the driving factor. Although we do it as a group in sessions, Osgar and Elis have done most of the technical mixing. They both gravitate towards the mixing side of things and Osgar has a sound engineering qualification as well. For the mixing on this album, Elis would do most of the nitty-gritty, but it always ends up being a session with all of us around the computer saying, "No, tweak that frequency, tweak that up, tweak that down."

We never try to do the mastering ourselves. We sent the mastering off to Josh Bonati and we also used Harris Newman in Montreal, who mastered the single release of "Morning, Kepler." It's nice to do the mixing ourselves. It's a lot of work though.

cz: How long did it take to mix *Popular Demain*?

A: We finished recording in April 2015, May, maybe, but I think we only finished mixing it in September or October. It's mainly because getting us all together in the same room can be complicated. Even though we're a band and we play together and tour together, it's actually quite hard to organize rehearsal time together. Everyone's got different schedules. With mixing, we all want to be here so we can hear what's been done before it's sent off. Again, it was nice to do it ourselves because, if we can't be there in the room while someone mixes it, there's an element of chance. And also, it saves us money, so (laughs).

cz: I think a big piece too is that, when most people take the time to do the mixing themselves, it's not just doing it, but it's the luxury of being able to have that level of perfectionism that isn't possible otherwise. If you hire someone who mixes a handful of records every month as their job, it's not going to be reasonable for them to spend those extra hours on whatever tiny thing you guys would want to put attention towards.

a: Exactly, yeah. It's not in their interest. I would say most qualified mixing engineers, especially if they are just taking it as a job on top of something else, are almost trained to not give a shit at a certain point, to go, "Right, okay," and move on. That's a sound approach (laughs), but if you're doing it yourself, you've got to be neurotic as hell about how it sounds. It makes the mixing harder, but also more rewarding in the long run, I think.

cz: Obviously, there are some blanket-statement functions of mixing: bringing clarity between elements, achieving a balance frequentially, but do you think there is a certain sound that you guys really try to aim for with your mixes stylistically?

A: I think we all have slightly different priorities in our own heads. I'm not a mixing engineer and I don't have that background or training, but I always have big ideas about how I want it to sound. So does Elis, so does Osgar, and so does Neil, but personally, my ideas would definitely be that I want it to sound slightly warm or gritty, kind of fuzzy. That's not incredibly technically specific from a mixing and mastering point of view, but I know enough to push in the right direction towards what I want. Some of the other guys, like Osgar and Elis, have a bit more experience with the mixing side of things, doing all the right things that actually make it sound that way. I know enough to demo things to sound a certain way but then work with the other guys to polish it more.

cz: When every song is allowed so much room for tons of instrumentation and tiny additional nuances or layers, how do you decide what to use? Is it usually spontaneous or something decided early on? So, for instance, when and why do you end up deciding, "Okay, we need the second drum kit"?

A: We almost always use a second drum kit because the idea was to write a double drumbeat. It's rare that we would have a drum beat and then go, "Oh, let's just add a second drum kit." The double drumbeats that were written on the new album are very much so composed as double drumbeats. Though there can be a lot

of spontaneity in making choices as well.

The song, for me, that is the biggest fusion of everyone's ideas in the room, where we really came together as a big group composition, was "Boston Space." That one took a little while to write, but I think there are a lot of ideas in there that were very spontaneous, that then stuck in and were refined as we moved forward with it. It's a nice fusion of all our influences into one song. It kind of has a bit of everything. There's a point where that song gets quite heavy and crazy with strong guitars and distanced-sounding, slightly retro sci-fi synths here and there. It hints at that sense of randomness, a completely planned randomness. Heavy versus twinkly versus distant, if that makes any sense to you.

We've definitely never left that much to be improvised. Most of what you hear on the album, I would say 99% of it, is pre-composed. Then, when we do play live, we tend to play it as it was composed, but there are usually interludes that we improvise in. We generally like to strip things back after adding in a lot of stuff.

cz: Because you guys have been so open to adding different kinds of supplementary sonic layers, have you ever thought to include vocals?

A: It's come up, but we never had the opportunity to pursue it much. I don't think we'd necessarily be adverse to it, but it's not part of our usual working method. We're used to writing without having to think about vocals. Obviously, I think melody is a big part of our sound, and in a way, that replaces the need for a vocal in some sense. That's definitely an interesting angle to go on and see what would happen if we tried it out. We use a lot of processed voices and samplers, which obviously isn't the same thing, but that's something we're quite fond of, especially on this album. These slightly worbly, warped lo-fi voice samples found their way into a lot of it.

cz: Can you explain the purpose of the title *Popular Demain*?

A: It's a stupid pun really. Demain means "tomorrow" in French, so it's basically "popular tomorrow." We never called it that or anything, but that happened when I was writing part of the song "Popular Demain" with the guys. As a joke, we called it that, because we felt like we needed a song on the album that was a bit like our more upbeat stuff on *Pal Magnet*. We started fucking around with stupid pronunciations of it and then it just stuck, saying it in a French accent. So then it became "Popular Demain," but I think after a while we kind of enjoyed the name. For me, at least, the name has this vaguely retro sci-fi deal (laughs) and, I don't know, I think some of that sound is in our music as well. That's the best explanation I can give. We never shied away from stupid song names that are just not serious at all.

cz: How do you think *Popular Demain* sits in context to the rest of your discography?

A: One thing I was thinking about, when we were putting it together, was that, when people would hear the album, it would be a tendency for people to think of the EP's as a warm-up to the album. It might be seen as the main attraction, whereas the EP's were just our buildup and I don't really think of what we've done in that way. We've just changed, or evolved, or whatever. *Pal Magnet* has its own vibe. It's a bit more band-like, even though it has a big sound. *Pal Magnet* still feels a bit more raw, whereas, on *Popular Demain*, we were going for a very expansive, multifaceted studio sound. It is still organic sounding, but I don't think it sounds like a band in a room in the same way as some of our previous releases. It's a lot more layered and I think having an album format gave us a lot more opportunity to have songs of a slightly different character, like slower and quieter songs. And that was fun, because with an EP, you don't really have as many options. You have to decide what's in and out. But with an album, eight tracks was nice, because it's not overly long but it's enough to show a few different sides of the band. I think songs like "Lost Console," "CGI Sky," and "Cordillera" all show a really different side to our sound, compared to where we have gone on the previous EP's. One thing about having an album is that you don't feel like you have to prove everything in a song that's only one of three or four. You can go with one song and say, "Right, this song is just going to be this kind of mood or this one thing." You don't have to solve all of the world's problems in the space of just one tune.

cz: Looking to the future, what do you think the shared goals of the band are moving onward?

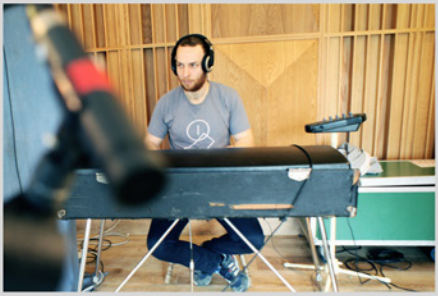
A: Well, I think we're just taking it one thing at a time. We haven't really gotten together to start writing our follow-up material, so that's the next chapter. I think we all want to keep it aloft because, especially in the last two years or so, it's gotten a nice reach, particularly internationally. After a lot of years of just plugging away at it and eventually getting things out, it's paying off in a nice way. Even if it's not occupying us full time, it's reaching a lot of people around the world and people who are into this kind of music are finding it and telling us how much they like it. That's a very nice reason to keep going. That's actually quite satisfying for us.

At the end of each interview, we asked the artist to list any albums they have recently been listening to and enjoying. We also requested they mention an album that was critical on shaping their initial passion for music, regardless of it current relevance to them.

Barry
Recently enjoying: Charles Mingus - *Ah Um*, Oneohtrix Point Never - *Drawn and Quartered*
Influential: Tortoise - *TNT*

Elis
Recently enjoying: Survive - *Survive*
Influential: Disasterpeace - *Fez OST, It Follows*, *Hyper Light Drifter*

Osgar
Recently enjoying: Jaga Jazzist - *Starfire*
Influential: Radiohead - *Hail to the Thief*




During our interview, it came up and has since been confirmed that "lead drummer" Neil Crowley has recently left the band, due to his pursuit of a new work opportunity, which has relocated him to Australia.

https://alarmist.bandcamp.com/
https://soundcloud.com/alarmistband
https://www.facebook.com/alarmistband
https://twitter.com/alarmistband

mathbonus

we're drowning

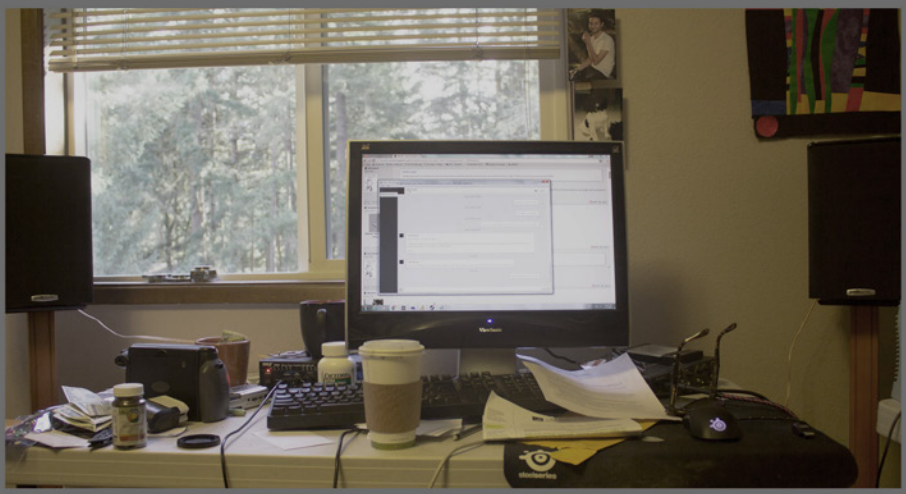
In my mind, mathbonus is an artist who has done the impossible. Through an impressive realization of his own potential to create, he expanded my view of what was musically possible as well as what people are truly capable of. Up until that point, music had a stricter relationship with life, one that would easily entangle itself in human conundrums and put limits on our efficiency. My view was that in order to create something persuasive and impactful, one needs to be both expressively inspired and committed to fulfilling those inspirations wholly. Depending on one's state of mind, the inventive stage can be an extraordinarily seamless and exciting piece of the operation, but when it comes to manifesting those ideas into their greatest clarity, it often takes a great deal of exertion, regardless of the medium. Whether the initial creative outburst exists by way of MIDI and digital synthesis or a live instrumentation jam session, the trail to great music requires immense attention to every step of the process, many of which will take place long after that inceptive glee. I had always assumed that the typical rate of releasing music, as recurrently shown by artists across the spectrum, was just a reflection of the limits of what could feasibly be achieved without sacrificing creative quality or cutting corners in the realization of the work. While some groups are praised for the prolificacy of producing two major releases in the same year, others are admired for their agonizingly slow process of selectiveness and patience that yields an opus every five to ten years. Although everyone has a pace unique to their own process, in both of the above cases, there are boundaries that suggest that artists need a minimum amount of time to crank out finished and compelling works. Perhaps everyone's recorded output would increase if they dismissed live performances and touring or conventional aspects of life that are irrelevant to music. But if all of one's focus is centered in on outputting records, most artists agree that, at a certain point, forcing oneself to write too often will bear uninspired content. As a consequence, this is why there tends to not be an urgency to put out a dozen releases in a year. Even if there is minimal creative resistance throughout, the process of making a record is taxing and especially time consuming when the standards are high.

For the most part, I still think all of that is true, but Sam Bothun, the man behind mathbonus, pushed the boundaries of just how much I had thought someone could make without falling apart in a creative or technical aspect.

I began following Sam's work sometime in 2012

amongst a handful of other bedroom producers, as they were vernacularly known at the time. While never a particularly formal movement or brand, a new generation of electronic music was making strides in the 2010s. Despite the frequent adaptation of heavier drums inspired by modern hip hop, the music aimed towards a more ambient and energetically mellow sound design as part of its characteristic emotional appeal. Excluding a handful of unofficial remixes and drafts that were posted to his SoundCloud, mathbonus formally began his career with a handful of short EP's and two track singles that began earning him a reputation between 2012 and 2014. By the time of *elegy* and *Vestiges* in later 2014, Sam's style had certainly

become pronounced into its own. Months after *Vestiges*, mathbonus returned with a vengeance to innovate, releasing *hellbores and mania* in April of 2015, an eight track release truly unlike anything he had previously made and a release that distinguished himself well from anyone else in the electronic scene, underground or not. Riddled with volatile distortion and tight compression across the board, the album succeeded through a dark, highly impressionable production style and a dexterity in layering simple melodic elements together to fasten songs that were tonally complex and emotionally evocative. Only twenty-six days later, mathbonus released the seven-track *nobody here*, an album equally if not more impressive than the last. Filled with yearning guitar melodies, ghostly synth lines, and a constant churning motion that pushes forward to an emotionally cathartic and desolate conclusion, it is an album I believe will stand incredibly well against the test of time. Even after this perfectly mixed specimen, he continued to put out an exorbitant amount of music at an equally overwhelming pace. While I admit that by the end of it, the quality control hadn't stayed as impressively impeccable, there were still a number of incredible pieces that would follow *nobody here*, specifically from *Black Dog*, *Obsidian Veins*, *Falling/Stretching*, *Craw/Claw*, *Musings*, and *let the reaper reap*, to name a few. Starting from *hellbores and mania*, mathbonus released fifty-six tracks within the eight months following it, spread across eleven unique releases. Throughout that period of time, I was in a constant state of awe, becoming increasingly surprised and nearly confused with each email notification I received of a new release. The longer that he kept it up, the more it felt like he was bound to suddenly stop, to crash and burn — but he continued to surprise me. Even while his miniscule fan base seemed to become less engaged with



each release, he continued forward. Creation was all that seemed to matter to him and it was simply amazing to observe someone as committed to their craft as Sam.

we're drowning is the first release from mathbonus this year and is also the first release on consumer zero. The album's blend of straight driving percussion, thick sub basslines, wavering detuned synths, distorted guitars, and lamenting vocal samples encapsulate mathbonus's recent signature sound quite effectively, while keeping the approach of delivering these elements dynamic and smooth. Tracks like "black" and "no room" crescendo into explosions of harmonious culmination, alternating well with more statically arranged and consistently paced pieces like "fringe" and "schizzz" that vibe steadily onwards, picking the pieces back up again. Quivering electrical noise and a field recording of birds chirping are a good deal of the sonic charm in "fringe," meanwhile, "one last time" upholds its identity through generously applied delay and rattling loudness. Much like a vocalist straining their voice or the sound of plucking a string so hard that it warps wonkily, the severity of the main vocal's clipping distortion and the synth lead's detuned oscillators work in just the right way to nearly come across as plain wrong, but only nearly. These aspects invite the possibility of falling down into complete dissonance, all by dancing a little too close to the edge for comfort. Because Sam manages to play with fire without getting anything burnt, these subtleties of imprecision also serve to bring harmonic resolution to the song. Discord and decay are allowed to freely exist in Sam's music as subjects of beauty.

Remarkably, the release has a consistent emotional intensity throughout, even when the energy seems to be brought down completely. “schizzz,” for instance, is one of the slowest and most musing tracks, but manages to sustain a mood of disassociation that works as an ingenious reactionary dullness to mathbonus's melodic climaxes. Much like the dichotomy of savory guitar leads and overtly detuned synths, “schizzz” works to travel through less glamorous territory than other songs, allowing the mood to go full circle, ultimately making for a more dynamic release. If replaced by strings and a piano, the music of *we're drowning* might sound cheerily pensive and cinematic, eager to pull at the heart, but when communicated with the set of sounds Sam employs, its delivery becomes stronger. Like hearing sensationally pure poetry spoken by a coarse and damaged voice, the message and its speaker become connected in their flaws and triumphs, the message here being the intrinsic music and the speaker being the quality of the sound used to communicate it. While this theme is relevantly clear in mathbonus's work, it also exists in the relationship between all creators and their creations. Creators can often murky their work for others by being so human and flawed that it tarnishes the piece. The reality of their human imperfection contrasts with their art because their art is something so methodically controlled and cared for that it is quite unrealistic to expect humans to function at their art's standard of scrupulousness. Equally true, becoming aware of the humanness of a creator can also bring new beauty and life to their work, because decay, imperfection, and uncertainty are all very capable of providing depth and appeal, both in music and life.

Sam is an incredibly modest person and maybe a bit too honest with himself sometimes. Characterized by his short-spoken demeanor, the thoughts he does choose to put to words carry incredible wisdom. Filled with long pauses and a variety of since omitted "I don't know's," the dynamics of my conversation with Sam Bothun surprised me in the same way the stunning work of mathbonus often has.

Whether it's *elegy* or *nobody here*, *Black Dog* or *we're drowning*, I urge you to give his work a listen.

consumer zero: How did your passion for music grow throughout your life and at what point did you start creating music?

mathbonus: I played clarinet in middle school and that was the first time I really started playing music in any context. I used to play with the Fruity Loops demo and have always been messing around with different things, but it wasn't until early college that I really put in the work to get better at the computer stuff. It's always something I've messed around with and enjoyed tinkering with. And for whatever reason, I just decided to get more serious about it in college.

As a listener, I've always loved music. There's an analogy I like to use that a really good song can be like a good friend and I think I go into creating with that mindset.

cz: Starting at when you put out *hellbores and mania*, there was a huge spike in your productivity. How do you explain this?

mb: I don't know. I'm trying to slow down now, because I don't want to overload people with too much music, which I've definitely done in the past. It was just a period where I was highly productive in the studio. There's really no explanation other than that I just love making music and I want to make as much as possible.

With *hellbores and mania* specifically, due to some personal reasons, I couldn't make music for a couple weeks. I didn't have access to my studio and I really remember missing making music. So when I finally got access back to my studio, I just sat down and wrote a bunch of songs in a row. The passion for it is always there; it's just whether or not I can put together something that is meaningful to me, and hopefully to somebody else too. I felt like I did that with *hellbores and mania*. That's an example where I wrote a bunch of songs in a short period of time and I'm pretty happy with how they came out.

I'm not sure what explains the spike in productivity other than just the stars aligning or something. I was able to write a lot of music that I was happy with. Looking back, I don't regret doing anything like that. I'm certainly proud of the stuff I've made and I wouldn't change anything I've done. It's all a learning experience.

Regarding the whole period, I was never consciously thinking, "Maybe I'm making too much." The thought didn't even cross my mind. It was just like, "I love doing this, so I'm going to do it." I've gotten feedback from multiple people that putting out stuff once every few weeks may be a little bit much, so like I said, I'm trying to cut back. Hopefully, this next release will be a nice little milestone and then I can go back in the studio to start on my next project (laughs).

cz: I think your sound is very clear and identifiable throughout everything you've done, but amidst that familiarity, after *Vestiges*, I noticed a shift towards heavier, darker sound design. Yet, alongside these very aggressive and distorted tracks also came a handful of lighter guitar-oriented ones. What inspired this change?

mb: So, I make what I want to hear. I like a lot of distortion sounds in hip hop beats and the electronic music that I listen to, so I try to capture some of that energy. There's something to be said for that distinction between clean guitar parts and distorted vocals. I don't know exactly how to put it, but there's something about the contrast of mixing it together that I find really appealing.

cz: In the period following *hellbores*, there were fifty-six tracks on formal releases. Personally, the most fascinating thing about that stretch of time to me is that so much of the music that you made has, to varying degrees, a very polished production and feels complete. There are a handful of SoundCloud artists who put out a lot of music, but at those rates, it tends to be unrefined, whether it be poorly mixed, a short clip, or just redundant. Why aren't you that person that's just putting up a track every other day and sure — it's written, but it's not to that next degree? Do you see what I'm saying?

mb: Yeah, I know what you mean. And like I said, I'm consciously trying not to be that person now, because I see so much on SoundCloud that's not necessarily bad by any means — but it's boring. I don't want to make five tracks in a week, have them all sound pretty much the same, throw it on SoundCloud, and hope it gets plays. I see stuff on SoundCloud and I see where I want to go. It's not uploading a bunch of stuff every other day, which I have done that in the past. When I started out, I would throw up something on there just to get feedback from random people and that was cool to receive, but now I'm beyond that stage and I want to make sure everything that I'm putting out is as polished as it can be. There's a line somewhere between paying too much attention to SoundCloud and my contemporaries, the other people who are doing a similar type of music that I am, and not paying any attention to it, just focusing on my own thing. I guess where I'm at now is a natural response to the SoundCloud community and environment. I just want to stand out the best I can.

cz: With such a high creative output, how you are able to maintain such a consistent and iconic style throughout your music without making tracks that sound too similar?

mb: Feedback. It's priceless. I have maybe three or four people that I'll frequently send stuff to. They might say, "This sounds like blah blah blah or something you made in the past," and I'll think that if they're saying this, then there is probably something to it. Feedback is extraordinarily beneficial for that.

cz: Do you ever feel like you are ripping yourself off, then later see that it was actually more original than you thought? Or vice versa, do you ever create something that you feel is very new, and then find it bland when looking back on it?

mb: Definitely. The second thing happens to me and it's always disappointing. I'll be having a great day, sit down in my studio, and make something that I think sounds good. Then, I'll come back to it the next day and I'll realize, "Oh, this is actually kind of shitty." But that's all part of the process. If a song ends up sounding like a preexisting one, it would be a consequence of just making what I want to make and it happening to sound like something I've already made. I never try to specifically reproduce something I did in a previous song.

When it comes to this, I think *Black Dog* comes to mind pretty readily. As I was making it, I was super — well, I'm still happy with how it came out, but when I was working on it, I was very excited about every track on there and I guess I thought it was going to be a bit bigger than it was in terms of the reception it would get. Now, looking back, there are definitely some filler type tracks on there.

cz: I feel that a lot of your use of heavy compression and master limiting is quite stylistic, which I almost never find with music mixed and mastered with extreme loudness in mind. With songs like "night walk," "nobody here," "Claw," "Landline Alive," "breathe," "mania," and "one last time," the hefty compression and occasional limiting artifacts give it a sense of pressure that adds to their intensity. Because there are a handful of other songs that are quieter and more transparent in dynamic processing, I get the sense that this is certainly more stylistic than procedural. Is there some truth to this? Why does it happen when it does?

mb: Oh, for sure. There's definitely something to be said for making music in 2016, maintaining good dynamics throughout your track, and not pushing stuff to the absolute limit, but there's also something to be said for pushing stuff with a limiter or compressor very aggressively. It can be a very stylistic choice and I think that is reminiscent of how I tend to enjoy the way big drums and distorted instruments sound. Still, I hope I don't only make stuff where I'm pushing it to eleven, so to speak. Going back to just listening to random artists on SoundCloud, there are people that do it well and there are people that don't do it well. I just do it the best that I can to my own tastes.
I usually make the decision to treat things that way when I want to make a track loud (laughs), although it depends on the track. If it's something that I feel will work really well on a large system, I'll make sure to compress and limit accordingly, pushing the dynamics as far as I can.

cz: At what point of developing your technical skills do you think you garnered the knowhow to have a bit more control with knowing what you wanted to do and being able to actually do it?

mb: I don't know when that happened or if it even has happened. I'm still learning how to make music, but in some sense, it just happens gradually. Mixing is such a vital part of the process that you can't really skip it. As you're learning how to write, you just slowly teach yourself how to mix. Now, people tell me my mixes sound good, but I don't know if I have crossed some threshold where I can now make shit that I think about doing beforehand. I mean it's never really like that. It's always a trial and error

process, although I certainly think I'm closer to that point now than I was a few years ago. As I'm making it, I'm willing to try crazier distortion stuff or approach things more out of leftfield. I'm not super worried about the mixing portion of the project ahead of me, because I'm fairly confident that I can make it sound good.

cz: Now, to shift our focus towards the early moments of a song's conception, is there a usual way that you tend to approach writing when you start a song?

mb: It changes literally every time. I don't really have an approach to writing that's consistent. I don't even know if it works very well, but I think I'm doing something right. It's always circumstantial, like, sometimes I'll do the drums first, sometimes I'll make a melody first, or sometimes I'll start with a sample. It really just comes down to the day and the individual session. Things just come together. I don't have any formal music training and I don't know much about theory, so it's never very consistent. That's probably the least consistent thing, my approach, which is a pretty big part of the process.

We could take "Fog," for example. I made that track three years ago, but I still remember that I started with the chords and had those down before anything else. After that, I remember getting the melody that I wrote over it stuck in my head. I would be driving and I would just have the song stuck in my head, which was a good indicator to me that I had something catchy. So I structured the main synth patch around the main chords, and then I did the drums next, followed by the vocal chops.

Something like "Vibe Thru the Dark" from *Black Dog*, for example, was a sample-based track. I started with the sample, which in the case of this song was just a kind of droning sound. I filled in the drums after that and thinking about it now, I guess drums do usually come second. I just chose the first few tracks that came to mind.

When it comes to songs from *we're drowning*, "one last time" is a similar case to "Vibe Thru the Dark," where I found a vocal sample that I liked, I slowed it down, and added drums and a bass track.

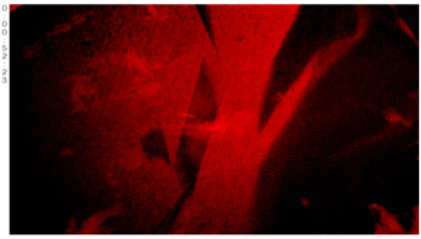
In comparison, "Black" was another example where I started with the chords and added the drums after I had the melody and distorted vocal in place.

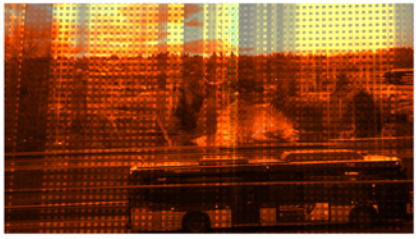
cz: What kind of setting would you like your music to be heard in? I feel like your music is completely dancefloor compatible, yet also very introspective, fit for listens alone in your room, or out walking in the middle of the night.

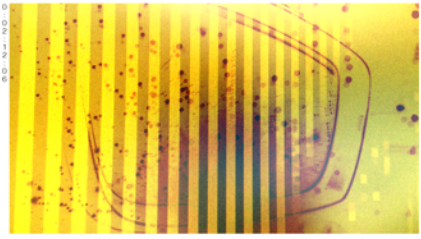
mb: I imagine most people probably listen to it like you're saying, alone in the room, out for a walk, or browsing SoundCloud. However, if you want to talk about ideally, I'd like to play Coachella or something like that (laughs). It's kind of a lofty goal, but I'd love to play on a huge system. I don't know how well stuff would translate because I've never played on anything even remotely close to that, but I think a lot of my tracks would work well played on a good system, regardless of however many people are there. I'm playing a bar show tonight, and I don't know if that's necessarily the best venue to hear my music in, at least it's a venue. So, realistically, it's probably people with their headphones on at their computer or out taking their dog for a walk, but I'd love to play it to an audience at a bigger show. Especially as far as live playing goes, that's the dream.

cz: Do you think there's something to be said for the flexibility of it fitting both environments so well?

mb: At the end of the day, I'm definitely just a studio guy. That's where my comfort space is. The intent is more on the side of wanting to create a listening experience, with a full album, and however you listen to that is just fine. Simultaneously, I have a dream of playing to a big audience, so maybe that comes across in the music and gives the impression of fitting both contexts. I definitely write catering to the listening experience, as a full release — sit down and listen to the whole thing — but I would still absolutely love to play big shows. That gets into listening live versus just listening to the music yourself. I think I lean more towards the second and that's what I meant by saying that I'm a studio guy. The focus is definitely more on making an experience for the listener rather than putting together a live show. I kind of view the two as separate. But yeah, I super appreciate that comment.







cz: On your social media, as well as in some of your album's descriptions, there are recurring mentions of mental illness. Do you feel like that is something worth mentioning here? Should that be a part of your identity?

mb: It is what it is and I suppose it is a part of my identity. I'm just a person like anybody else, you know. I happen to have some problems that other people don't have, but at the same time, I make music that other people don't (laughs). I don't know if that sounds a bit arrogant, but yes, it is certainly worth mentioning.

cz: Regarding the new release, *we're drowning*, whether it was conscious or not, where would you say the inspiration for those songs came from?

mb: I don't know. That's a good question. What I make is a reflection of where I am in my life. It's a reflection of my relationships with people. It's a reflection of how I feel about life and so a lot of it is kind of dark, although a lot of it isn't super dark. For example, the name "Schizzz" is referring to schizophrenia. That's just where the name came from, I don't think the track has anything to do with schizophrenia or any other mental illness. Again, I don't know if its impact is very clear and direct, but it's certainly worth mentioning. You can't really leave it out.

cz: You said it well there that you feel like what happens in your life impacts your music. What were those circumstances for this release?

mb: That's kind of a big question. My songs don't have lyrics so it's really open to interpretation and I hope that if I'm making it from an honest place, people are going to connect with it on the same level. I deal with shit like anybody deals with shit and I've put a lot of that into music. Things like —oh, I don't know (pause) unrequited love and other romantic things certainly come into play (laughs). It's hard for me to give a concrete answer. I'm a pretty private person but at the same time I'm open to the discussion. I think the takeaway from any of this is just that what you make is going to be a reflection of what's going on in your life and that's unavoidable.

Recently enjoying: Southtowne Lanes - *Give up the Ghost*, Beach House - *Depression Cherry*, Drake
Influential: Boards of Canada - *Music Has the Right to Children*, Aphex Twin - *Drukqs*, 50 Cent - *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*

Available for purchase in digital formats and as a physical CD via the consumer zero Bandcamp, *we're drowning* will release on May 13.

http://mathbonus.bandcamp.com

https://soundcloud.com/mathbonus

https://facebook.com/mathbonus

https://twitter.com/mathbonus

#1
Creative Motivation

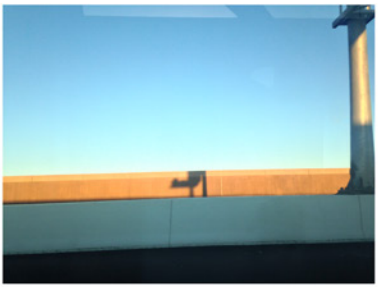
As I continued work on this magazine and the other creative projects that were occupying my life at the time, a desire to understand the creative process expanded in a new direction. I kept my usual fascination with the tightrope-balance between inspiration and execution, but new curiosities of "why" kept me questioning the essential purpose of creation. In trying to understand this, I observed that in many scenarios people create art to satisfy themselves. This doesn't necessarily make these artists narcissists; rather, they are finding contentment from bringing their ideas into reality, a form that their work can exist in outside of their brains. The feeling of achievement in transforming the abstract into the concrete drives their creative output, in no way different from the satisfaction that people find in using words to effectively convince others of their ideas.

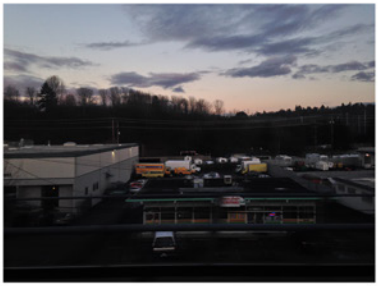
However, this also points to the opposing school of thought, which proposes that one should create for the sake of sharing their ideas with other people. Here, the persuasive speakers' purpose is not for their own satisfaction, but for contributing to everyone else's. The extreme cases of this are projects where the creator finds no enjoyment in bringing their ideas to life, but is driven to complete what they have started in order to help others experience it. They understand that their contributions will enable others to think in a new way, or provide the bliss that they had also once experienced in the first few hours of inspiration, which have since dwindled as a consequence of going through the motions necessary to compose a complete, presentable work. This is one of the defining differences between someone who has a large amount of projects that will never be finished and someone who may have fewer initial ideas, but makes an effort to complete as much work as possible, regardless of how uninspired they feel.

When I find myself running around in thoughts concerning music's intrinsic meaninglessness, currently disposable state, and trivialized monetary value, I look to the releases that have brought me so many hours of insight and joy for inspiration, because many of them had no sensible reason to be completed. For instance, there are the albums where the expenses from a band's recording process will cost them far more than the album will ever make, the projects where someone spends hundreds of hours working away in solitude for it to only be heard by some thirty or forty people they will never meet. Miraculously, these works can serve well as an antidote for those dismally practical spirals of thought that suggest that it is a waste to ever make anything at all. Despite their investments making no sense from a purely utilitarian standpoint, they are able to provide great value in someone else's life. While it may be impossible to know as the creator, a well-executed effort can have extraordinary impacts on individual people, costs aside. In my personal experience, numerous releases of this scale have been integral in shaping both my appreciation for music and my understanding of the world. Upon discovering these less obvious gems, one becomes instantly gracious that the creators behind them have overcome the unfavorable odds of obscurity to bring the works to life. With this perspective in mind, I realize that if I choose not to follow through on bringing my own ideas into reality, M. Centeno is never releasing *Creating A Mind,* Polaroid Summer is never writing *Patterns For Feelings*, and oldtoy is never taking the time to mix *After travel.* While it may not be appealing to go the extra mile and finish a work, there is wisdom worth considering that down the road, someone else might benefit greatly from your efforts.

Finally, the last outlook on creative motivation suggests that the process can happen quite randomly. Someone will simply make something with no premeditation or conscious decision to continue. Happening without any internal monologue, the process takes place for no reason or purpose at all. Impartiality exists here in the same way that it does when breathing, waking from sleep, or unexpectedly remembering an old memory. See, is there a reason you are breathing at this moment? Did you ever think to breath at all? Could you stop now if you tried? Who did you wake up for? Was it for you, was it for everyone else, or did it just happen?

In most cases, I think it is some combination of the three.





Music Today

Personal Writing #2

As this issue approached its completion, writing about music became progressively more frustrating. At the same time, I felt reassured by that sentiment, because that exasperation and difficulty was exactly why I had set out to write in the first place. Today the words and images surrounding music are often far more distorting and misrepresenting than they ever are helpfully characterizing or indicative of what the actual music is like. Like a perfectly fresh carton of apples wearing a large, bright expiration date exceeded sticker or a rotten counterpart wrapped neatly in glistening gold paper, the abstractness of music is almost never allowed to sit alone. Contrastingly, in a variety of visual art mediums, the piece's core content is unobstructed from view, routinely remaining the center of attention, with the occasional deviation when a work's name or a curator's personal descriptions shove themselves into frame. For a handful of reasons, art in the visual world has been able to afford this luxury of maintaining creative purity in the vast majority of situations. While it still has its exceptions, like when we murky our perception of Michelangelo's work with the conceptual burdens of whatever movement we have decided he belongs to, the paintings of the Sistine Chapel ceilings remain the subject of historically consistent praise solely for their demonstration of artistic mastery. The murals were never favored for the clothes Michelangelo wore, a stylishly apathetic persona, buzzword based write-ups, socially conscious commentary, or a shocking advertisement strategy, and neither are the visual arts of today. However, the domain of sonic expression has become so convoluted with all of these deceptions that most listeners will follow the aforementioned cues with more care than anything they are actually hearing.

We shouldn't abandon these attachments altogether, but at the very least we must raise awareness for how truly uninformative and illusory they are. Then, with a leveled understanding of the distinction between conceptual analysis and evaluation of the creative craft, the discussion of music can be rectified to be just that, a discussion of the actual music. This isn't to say by any means that lyrical narratives, associated artwork, and subgenre jargon don't have a place in music discourse. They can all work in unique ways to provide support and depth to the composition, opening up enriching extensions to one's understanding of it. However, these reinforcing components shouldn't be the main focus of attention. The music world has become so set in its ways that the majority of mainstream music journalists and colloquial talkers alike have clung to the more extraneous elements. Nearly any modern review juggles rehashed genre terms, vague tonal descriptions, and melodramatic adjectives, which will ultimately fail to provide any substantial information on the music itself. Meanwhile, in presence of this romantic filler, a fundamental understanding of sound's behavior and the integral steps of the recording process is ignored or dismissed entirely. A high-end music critic efficiently knows how to slip in dozens of up and coming style monikers, all of which, if they are yet to already, will immediately be pasted onto an extreme diversity of acts, the poles of which will have absolutely nothing to do with each other. The terms will quickly bleed out and become so meaningless they can easily find their way into a description of anything that uses a reverb pedal, non 4/4 time signature, or vocal-less rock arrangement. Most serious listeners build their credibility off of an intricately stacked arrangement of musical catchwords that easily out and impress anyone who doesn't understand them, yet they don't even have a familiarity with how sounds exists on a frequency spectrum, let alone an understanding of what mixing is beyond a textbook definition of adjusting volume levels. Imagine if viewers of a painting chatted on about the rosy, warm, and radiant background texture, but were unable to identify the color red.

Among other things, consumer zero is my attempt to remedy this, to shift attention back towards the craft itself. It is an effort to scale down on the conceptualism and visual identity and focus more on what really matters: the music. Independent music, for instance, depends on advocacy, not because it is lesser known, but because when it is ingenious or exceptionally innovative, its inherent quality isn't enough to lift it out of obscurity. There are countless artists who aren't fortunate enough to have a trendy visual appeal or a cutting edge, media-friendly backstory, artists who are taking far bigger strides musically than their rampantly successful counterparts.

Although I am encouraging that the overwhelming influence of words and imagery should be diminished, I am not saying that these elements are inherently evil. After all, these are the same tools I rely on to deliver my message to you. For better or worse, the music industry and its culture won't change unless its faults are addressed with the same tools it has perverted. What I'm objecting to is the abuse of pictures and words and their utility as a function of replacing the actual substance of music. People's keenness in using them to disfigure reality is a key factor in why music's success is often independent from its caliber. While conceptualism and visual identity have their place, music's intrinsic emotional value and intellectual communicability are far more deserving subjects of merit and relevancy.

Richard J. Birkin

Vigils

Richard J. Birkin / Emphemetry
(2001 - present)
The Little Explorer (2001 - 2007)
Crash of Rhinos (2009 - 2014)

article + interview

Released earlier this year on March 11, *Vigils* is the newest chapter in the musical lineage of Richard J. Birkin, a musician whose collaborative and independent work alike have proven to be incredibly diverse and skillfully orchestrated. Rarely shying away from a guitar, piano, or vocal delivery, Birkin's moving presence is unforgettably clear and distinguished, regardless of what role he's put into. I've never had the joy of standing by and attesting to each and every associated release of a musician as passionately and wholeheartedly as I have done with Birkin.

His newest full-length effort keeps many elements of his ambient proclivities, keenness for solo acoustic guitar, and electronically minded production, but fluently pushes them in the direction of richly layered strings and traditionally compositional sound palettes. The album beautifully exhibits a deep-rooted appreciation for melody in its most simple and sensitively blatant forms while upholding an equally impactful awareness for the context of what surrounds it. One of the most appealing and original facets of *Vigils* is its intelligence in controlling visibility, always managing to pull back and quickly shed down to its most core elements at just the right moment. Contrarily, but in this same essence, sudden assemblies of thick, harmonious environments allow for numerous moments of emotional apices. From start to finish, an intricate balancing act between minimal composure and indulgent ensemble plays out in *Vigils*' musical architecture. While never diverting your attention too much from center stage, the dynamic acts as a key influence in deciding where the spotlight shines.

Although he tells me much of what I've noticed is just as much a contribution of Paul Beal, Jim Cork, and his other former band mates, stylistic similarities run seamlessly throughout his solo work and associated projects, as understated as they may be. An incorporeal sense of relevancy appears in unsuspecting times, as his now brushed aside rendition of "Party Hard" eludes to the piano outro of The Little Explorer's "Sense of Smell" just as strongly as it does to the mood of the "Vigils" pieces some fourteen years later. His dispositions exist universally, but are not always straightforwardly obvious. In the most evident circumstances, a fondness for glockenspiels and acoustic guitars, for instance, prevails from the coupling Andrew W.K. cover "Ready to Die" to The Little Explorer's "Harmonics" and "Siderali". In less conspicuous correlations, the parallels between songs like Crash of Rhinos' "Lean Out" and "Francis Thompson," from *A Lullaby Hum for Tired Streets*, will tickle at familiar diverging emotions and vibrantly intertwined synaptic links that arouse a profound feeling of singularity, often leaving one dazzled with an ere of resolution beyond anything linguistically coherent.

consumer zero: Where do most of your songs begin? What ideas trigger the inception of a piece?

Richard J. Birkin: It can come from a lot of different things. Even though it is all built around melody and harmony, sometimes a powerful idea can come from something as simple as a drone. Often, I'll be messing around on the piano or the guitar, maybe with some effects pedals, and I'll stumble across something that tonally sounds interesting and makes me think of more things instantaneously over the top. And that can be a starting point. On the new album, "Atomhog" is a good example of that, because I accidently played that little melody at the start and then could almost instantaneously hear the string quartet arrangement over the top, or at least a couple of the lead lines that were there. With something that's more song based like "Moonbathing," I was jamming one night, messing around with synthesizers, and got this big textural drone going and all of the resonances created from the overlapping frequencies made me hear that it was an A major kind of thing. And then I just started playing some guitar over the top and the first thing that came out of my fingers was the "Moonbathing" riff.

Those pieces kind of gestate for a little while and I play with ideas in my mind. The ones that stay in my head while I'm on a train or walking somewhere are the ones that stick. I'll then record them into my phone overnight as a future idea for when I get to a computer or tape deck or something. The brief answer is probably loops and drones and random ideas, followed by layering and then harmonizing. Harmonizing is a big thing. A lot of my string arrangements I write with voice, because it's the quickest way to kind of explore strange harmonies for me.

cz: When it comes to writing, how do you usually store your ideas? When do you decide to demo something out or record it into your phone?

RJB: Deciding to demo something usually happens in the moment and it's very quick to fire up the nano recorder on a phone and get something down on that. Other times, it's just as quick to fire up Logic and get something recorded straight in using the microphone built into the laptop. Sometimes, on the train especially, it's easier to draw in MIDI in Logic, because you don't have a keyboard and there is too much noise to record things. I guess I'll use anything that's at hand, really.

When I was sixteen, I managed to save the money to get a 4-track tape player and I used to play into that nearly all the time. Then, I got a minidisc player after that, so I could record longer things; just anything that's at hand.

There's also a lot of lost material along the way, although I may revisit it at a later date. It takes a while to bring everything together and some things do get lost in favor of something new that keeps my attention. Maybe that is an automatic unconscious editing process, whatever's keeping my attention? The ten, eleven, or twelve pieces that I keep most in my attention at the point where I decide that I want to make an album are the ones that get taken forward, developed, and end up getting fully produced.

cz: Can you describe what the process of recording is like? What roles do you play and whom did you work with? Do you have a personal studio space you use, or do you mostly rely on renting out spaces?

RJB: Yeah, I've never had a recording studio. I have had spaces that have been more like writing spaces, somewhere where I could have a piano and some quiet. The place that I had first was in an old mill in a town outside Derby, England. At the time, I was finishing *Lullaby Hum*. I would go back to the studio and just sit and tinkle on the piano, writing. It was foggy and ghostly. There was a really loud whirr next to the mill and these pieces just started to come out. I write in places like that and those are the places that inspire me. They give me the space to develop and spend hours toying with ideas. When I decided to make the album, I didn't have a space or a piano. I took my microphones and equipment to an antiques center that has a piano section, down the way from where I live, and they let me spend a couple of afternoons there using the pianos to record the "Vigils" pieces. All of the piano on the record was done there in a couple of days.

Then I went about adding strings and did that over the course of three or four sessions. The main ones were in London with the Iskra String Quartet. I picked them because I'd seen them perform with Johann Johannson, who is a big influence, and I wanted performers who really knew the style of music I was going for,

people who I could ask for their opinions. And these guys seemed like the right ones. I booked a studio, went down and it happened really quickly, because those guys work really fast. I'd spent a long, long, long time scoring out the strings and making sure that everything was written down so professional players could look at it and go, "Yeah, I can do that." These guys just nailed it in one take every time and it sounded great. Actually, the recording process with *Vigils* has been the quickest and most stress free that I have ever had, surely because of that. It is so reliant on string players and the string players were so good. They just sounded so incredible right off the bat. The only distressing part was that niggling feeling that it shouldn't be this easy. I guess that came down to preparation and their skill. Traditionally with a record, I might spend a week or two recording, whereas with this one, it wasn't necessary.

cz: How involved are you in the post-processing side of things? Can you talk a bit about who mixed the record and if you're involved in that at all?

RJB: I am a complete control freak when it comes to that. I'll sit in on the mixing and mastering, and the vinyl cutting, just for the curiosity aspect, but Maurizio Borgna in Berlin did the mixing. I knew Maurizio from projects where he had recorded and mixed previous bands of mine. He's got a place in Berlin and there are some great composers working in the same studio complex he was mixing in, so it just made absolute sense to go to him. It was a nice excuse to spend a week in Berlin as well. We were working everyday tweaking the mixes and I was just sitting in and telling him about what I wanted to achieve. I think it might be quite difficult for a mixing engineer who doesn't know me, because Maurizio knows me really well. I can say, "I really want this to sound warm but dusty," and some other mix engineers might go, "What the hell do you mean by dusty?" and Maurizio has a really nice sense of, "Okay, yeah I can kind of get what you mean," and just does it.

cz: Can you also go into the mastering and who did that?

RJB: The mastering was by Joe Caithness in Nottingham. I've just been with him today, actually. He's been mixing a new project, just some first little few mixes. He's a very passionate and scientifically minded mastering engineer. It's great going in and sitting with him because I come away with two things. I come away with great sounding masters that have been put through some nice digital and analog gear. He's got that hybrid mastering process that I really like. And you also come away with a blown mind, because he has been telling you all about how psychoacoustics work and about EQ curves and octave distortion and things that despite having heard them multiple times now, I am still trying to wrap my head around. I can also get the train there and back fairly quick, which is very convenient. It's nice having him on your doorstep.

I also know him because he was in a few really good punk bands, one of which was called What Price, Wonderland? He also makes, or used to make, electronic music as well as being in the punk band and studying the science of mastering. The reason I went to him first was that I thought he could apply some of the spatial techniques of making electronic music to mixing largely non-electronic recordings, because that's often how I hear it in my head. The sounds that I want to make aren't mixed like traditional classical recordings; they're mixed in a lot more experimental way. That's the most concise way of putting it.

cz: Did you aim for a specific vision or outcome from the dawn of the project's writing process or did the process dictate its final result as it went on?

RJB: This album started out with an idea that was inspired by the Haruki Murakami book called *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. All of the “Vigils” pieces were written in a very short space of time and were my way of writing out my experience with part of that book. When I realized that I wanted to expand that sound into an album, that's when the music took over from the original concept. However, I always kept it in mind. I always kept referring back to that original concept. Every subsequent piece after that initial session where I recorded the pieces "Vigil I", "Vigil II", etc., I always sat and thought about whether their themes could tie into that and how they would be able to. The pieces did keep tying in and the way they tied in was by forming and becoming more of the process. One of the pieces was a commission to write a piece about black holes, so at least for me, that became a piece about how physics can be very powerful and destructive in reducing matter and form into its constituent tiny atomic parts. Then, the piece that came out after that was "Atomtog", which made me think of the human body at a subatomic level. And all of these things tied in

with and added to the narrative of that original soundtrack. There was a theme and a concept and then the music took over, but everything was kind of guided together to make a whole album through having different concepts that chimed well together.

cz: Do you find that the more you are giving your attention to these certain ideas, the more particular you get about them being finished in a specific way? In other words, do things become more set in stone the more you get interested in them?

RJB: With the new record, that's been really dictated by my desire to focus on string quartets, because I wanted the album to be centered on that format. That means that ideas have to be boiled down to something that can be performed by a quartet, or that sounds good with a quartet on it, apart from the solo piano pieces, which are more stripped back, obviously. With *Vigils*, the album, I think there are three kinds of approaches to arrangement there. There's a very stripped back approach where I have absolutely no desire to put anything on top of what was there after the first run-throughs. So, that's probably most of the “Vigils” pieces. They're pretty much just sparsed with a bit of strings here and there, but I had no desire to take those any further. I have come up with other ideas for those and recorded some of them, but they're just never as good as their simpler form.

On the other hand, "Moonbathing" took a different approach, as I knew that it was going to need a lot of expanding upon, because I was never happy with it being just guitar and vocals, or guitars and some strings. I tried it in full band configurations, did some recordings with a drummer, and none of them seemed quite right, so it took a while to decide on the arrangement. Actually, the finished version of "Moonbathing," although it does have a ton of stuff on it, sounds more stripped back than it originally did in my head. Hearing the clarity of it when it was finished, I realized all of these other ideas were just me filling in stuff in my head. Because when you do have music in your head, you don't have to mix it and have it actually make sense. So when I could hear a Squarepusher-style polyrhythm over the top of "Moonbathing," it sounded great in my head, and still does, but in the recording, it became pretty difficult to manage.

The third one is the more delicate and exploratory way of working. For me, my favorite song that uses that approach that I've ever done was "Vigil I," the first track on the album. That started out as a solo piano piece going in, ended up a solo piano piece at the end, but I was just gradually and subtly layering things, wanting the piece to never quite get there. That would be the main twist of the piece, that it was reaching for something but it never quite got there, but it hopefully holds your attention while it's doing that.

cz: "Moonbathing" is the only song on the album with singing. Can you explain your reasoning behind using vocals on it?

RJB: It wasn't very deliberate. The decision to include "Moonbathing" was more about my desire to not distinguish one style of writing from another. The fact that all of the other pieces may seem more at home with each other than with that one is a fluke. I think *Lullaby Hum* is a very varied album. I just happened to sing on a couple more than I do on this one. The whole idea behind going by my own name and releasing music of this kind is that I'm very tired of writing music that I feel goes well together but not putting it out together, just because an album should be completely instrumental or completely vocals. I'm tired of delineating between my soundtrack work and songwriting work.

It's just music. As long as it works well together, then it’s fine. If I was going to do a jingle jangly happy happy song in the middle of *Vigils*, I don't think that would work. I would say that then the sequencing on the record is a bit off. Conversely, I feel like "Moonbathing" is a nice centerpiece of the album, fitting in between all of the other evocative instrumental soundtracky stuff.

cz: Is "Vigil III" in any way alluding to that piano riff from "Accretions" or the string line from "Goodbye" off of *Songs for Spoken Words*?

RJB: Ah, interesting. The *Songs for Spoken Words* connection: no, not consciously. For the "Accretions" one, the high piano part of "Vigil III" has a lot in common with my style of playing in "Accretions", which is a really rapid triplet thing that I often do. It's really nice sitting and playing the piano like that, because I can't

play piano like Lubomyr Melnyk. One of the best parts of when he plays are all of the overtones that come out of the piano because he's playing so fast, so that style of playing on "Accretions" and "Vigils III" is my little version of that. You just rapidly play and wait to hear what emanates from the commutative effect of that. In style, it's similar to "Accretions", but the thematic allusion wasn't intentional. I'm really glad it's there, though, since you mentioned it. Now, every time someone asks me that, I'm just going to say, "Yeah, there are loads of hidden messages on the album" (laughs).

"Vigil III" was written as a post-script to another "Vigil" piece. It's the same with "Vigil V" and "Vigil VI" at the end of the album. "Vigil VI" just came out of "Vigil V" and developed into its own new thing and "Vigil III" went through the same process. It's probably similar to "Accretions" because they're all bubbling out of a thematically similar idea and they were all written and recorded in quick succession. I'm not surprised there are links between the pieces, because they're all from me at a particular time.

cz: I hope this isn't just an error in the press copy I got, but where is "Vigil IV"?

RJB: Well, it exists and it's one of my favorites. It just didn't fit on the album. I might put it on an EP or give it away as a free track with the album, though I'll probably re-record it. I haven't really decided yet, but yes, it exists and has existed for a while. In fact, it was among the first. They aren't numbered chronologically; they're numbered by how they sit together. I think "Vigil IV" was the first to be written out of all of them, actually. It's not a big secret and I'm not being obtuse. It's just that it will come out when it's right.

There were one too many "Vigils" pieces. The balance would have been a little bit upset, I think. I spent a long time on the track listing figuring out how it should all run together, whether that should be guided by how it sounds or the narrative part that I had in my head. I think the most important thing is that the album didn't suffer by it not being there.

cz: It's just the numbers that really threw me off, because I naturally wanted the order to make sense.

RJB: Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't trying to be a little bit obtuse with that, because when I decided to not it put on the album I just didn't want to rename all of the other bits that had already been submitted to publishers. I also thought it might be an interesting little thing that number four is missing and I can drop it in later and put it in as an extended piece, because I don't think that my exploration of those subjects or that sound is finished. At some point, I will expand on that, and "Vigil IV" will likely be a part of that.

cz: Looking back to the last full length you did, *A Lullaby Hum for Tired Streets*, would you say *Vigils* is an extension of your previous work or a step in a new direction?

RJB: It's more of a continuation. At the time, I'd always used the pseudonym Emphemetry. I never really wanted to go by my own name because I was a bit shy and it was always nice to have a moniker to hide behind. If I could go back, I would probably release *Lullaby Hum* under my own name, so I guess I would like to see *Vigils* just as a continuation of what I started then. Maybe *Lullaby Hum* was an album that was me trying to move away from singer-songwriter stuff and into compositional territory. *Vigils* is hopefully me in that composer territory completely, because that's how I feel in life now. I feel like this is what I am doing, want to be doing, want to be getting better at doing, and will do until the end.

cz: Could you go through the chronology of all of your solo releases and explain what each release mean to you now? What do you think they were encapsulating of their respective times?

RJB: Under the name Emphemetry, there was a CD-R release, a 4-track recording, which was a Christmas gift I gave to everyone in about 2001 or 2002. The songs were all very guitar and voice focused. Next, I did a little two track ambient piano CD-R where I covered Andrew W.K. songs in a soft style. I think they were both quite exploratory, making things just to see what fits. Although I'm still glad I did them, I probably wouldn't include them with the rest of my work very often.

The first thing I was really proud of, which I felt was my best, was *A Lullaby Hum for Tired Streets.* The part of my life that that is the culmination of involved walking home late after band practices, gigs, and traveling,

and night shifts at factories — experiencing a city at night when no one was around. That was the goal of making *Lullaby Hum*, to make an album that encapsulates all the different bits of those things. To me, I suppose that decision had influenced me to go on the path of making an album as a soundtrack rather than as a collection of songs. That decision made me not worry about having a solo piano track, followed by a tape drone track, then an acoustic and voice track, as well as a big twelve-minute post rock track. All of those things, all of those sounds, happened to me, so why shouldn't they be in an album together?

After *Lullaby Hum*, there is a big break where I was doing other things. Then there is *Songs for Spoken Words*, and that is partially trying to expand my writing to string quartets, but mostly a result of my desire to incorporate my music into web technology, which I had been working on for the previous three years in a job. I'd wanted to find a way to combine the two. I guess it's quite perplexing when you describe it, but it's a soundtrack for spoken word when the spoken word isn't there. I'd done some improvised guitar work for a poet and really enjoyed that, and when he stopped performing, I really wanted to expand those pieces to be a soundtrack for the emotions he created when he performed. It's not really that experimental in sound, but I guess the format and idea behind it is quite unique. That was really just a big feeling of desire to do that specifically. I wasn't driven to break the mold or anything. I just really had to do that project because it had been niggling at my brain for years. Doing that project, working with a string quartet for the first time, gave me the courage to expand my compositional work towards *Vigils*, which was a release I really wanted to be a nice soundtrack album.

cz: Is it fair to say your recent releases haven't been environmentally driven or inspired as much as they were a result of you reaching out to achieve something you really wanted to see happen?

RJB: Yes, I think that is actually a perfect way of putting it. I might paraphrase you in the future on that. I've kind of had an idea of something that I wanted to make and carried on chasing that idea until I was happy with it. Then I move on. I might not have the desire to do it again, or I might want to completely replicate it and continue that experience tomorrow.

cz: Do you know what the future of your solo work will be? Do you have any idea where you want to go and what the coming times will entail?

RJB: I'm doing a short tour in March, which is going to be me, a guitar, some keys, and effects pedals where I recreate the album on my own. Then, in May, I'm aiming to take a string quartet on tour for a short run of dates where we basically do the album as is and really go for creating the live show mood.

I'm working on a short film soundtrack at the moment. The film has just wrapped at the moment and I'll be scoring it in the next few weeks, so that's very exciting. It has got some amazing actors in it. It's called *Edith* and it is by a really talented writer named Ray Robinson. After that, there are a few interesting online storytelling projects that I've got miniature scores for, and I'm just carrying on writing full albums. The things that I'm really aspiring towards are more commissioned soundtracks, working for bigger productions. That's my dream, really, to score feature films and make albums.

cz: I want to discuss your participation in bands, particularly Crash of Rhinos, that has overlapped and meandered in between your independent releases over the last five years. In many ways, the projects are vastly different in character, so can you elaborate on how these projects were able to cleanly coexist?

RJB: Well, I think it's quite simple. One thing is making music with other people, the people that I grew up with. We wanted to create something inspired by the music that we all made each other listen to. Even before Crash of Rhinos, the solo thing comes out of my long held desire to be doing this, to be making music for a living, or making a life where I could make music. It gets a bit tiring, wanting to make a living out of making music, because it's pretty impossible. But to form a life where making music is possible and you can afford to really explore music and develop it has been my persistent desire all throughout my mature life. Crash of Rhinos and the other bands I've been in were part of that because they were me making music and having a life making music, but when I went home, or in the weeks or months where we weren't doing anything with bands, it would always be straight back to work. To answer your question, I guess I never really saw a divide.

cz: It's fascinating to me that you found the dichotomy so natural. Do you ever find yourself trying to make a loud rock song when you are sitting alone?

RJB: The guys who I grew up in bands with are the only guys who inspire me to want to make that kind of music. When I'm on my own, I have no desire to even use distortion pedals. When it's just me, I do have my own tendencies, and I think those tendencies are in those other projects. When I do other collaborations, those tendencies are always there. They're going to be there melodically or dynamically, they are just in a completely different setting.

cz: Finally, the album is called *Vigils* and certainly suggests a theme of midnight hours, as many of your releases seem to. Was there any reason your vigils were happening? Were these late hour pilgrimages in search for new melodies, or is it actually relevant to watching or being with someone who dies?

RJB: After writing three or four of the "Vigils" pieces, I noticed that I had this new thing that I kept doing unconsciously. I was starting off in a really meditative and still way, and then the pieces would ascend, evolving towards the end. This is really the closest I can see it relating to watching something die, so to speak. I think "Vigil I", "Vigil III", and "Vigil V" definitely do that. They were probably the ones where, when I was writing them, I thought they had this path of being very, very still for a few minutes and then going up from there. So there is that link. It wasn't deliberate. It was one of those names where I just wrote it down, "Vigil I", "Vigil II", "Vigil III", without much forethought really. Maybe all of the links were subconscious because of all of the stuff I was reading and the corresponding intent I had at the time.

Regarding late hour pilgrimages, I don't think it has to be late hour. It can be seen as early hour, because some of these songs happened at four or five in the morning, traveling or returning home from somewhere far away. However, there is that element that when the world is asleep, there is a different kind of stillness to appreciate. So, I think that maybe *Vigils* doesn't really have a theme of midnight hours, as much as it does a theme of stillness. With the other releases, yes, definitely a theme of midnight hours, but for this one, if I were to think of a time, it would be the early morning when the sun is coming up and all the mist is obscuring the world. It's a liminal time. Liminal is a good word to describe my intent with this album, where I was very deliberate. I wanted it to be liminal, between states.

A lot of things I was thinking about had to do with liminal states and transcendence. In the Murakami book, you get this idea that there's been some kind of evolution. I may have gone wrong in the book, but to me, it's about being inside the brain, or the world inside the brain, becoming the world, rather than it being made of the outside world we live in. There's research and theories in the real world that aren't science fiction — they're science fact — where people are researching how much of the world our brain creates and how much of the brain we can recreate or simulate to evolve. All of that is definitely in there, although, I would say that whenever I think of science fiction, I always think of it as an old fashioned thing. *Vigils* is probably not set in a shiny new future. *Vigils* is set in our present being looked at from that future. It's dusty, a bit derelict. It's been left alone. There's no use for it anymore.

Recently enjoying: GoGo Penguin - *Man Made Object*, Kendrick Lamar - *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Field Music - *commontime*
Influential: Radiohead - *Kid A*, Fleetwood Mac - *Greatest Hits*, Jóhann Jóhannsson - *IBM 1401, A User's Manual*

Vigils was released on March 11, 2016 by Reveal Records. A physical CD can be purchased through the Reveal Records' Big Cartel store and the album is available digitally on iTunes.

http://rjbirkin.co.uk
https://emphemetry.bandcamp.com
https://soundcloud.com/rjbirkin
http://facebook.com/rjbirkin

Crash of Rhinos

Distal acknowledgement

For some time, I was worried about writing on this album, simply because there was so much ground to cover. This is an album that has taught me as much about music as it has about life, so I wanted to be especially careful with what I said. Up until discovering *Distal*, I could never name a favorite album when asked, and I believed that my disinterest with singling one out was a matter of personal philosophy. Once you grasp an understanding of the overwhelming quantity and diversity of music in existence, you begin to realize that it doesn't make very much sense to compare works in an objective way. While there were plenty of releases I found nearly perfect and would enjoy immensely, it seemed pointless to put them against each other when they are clearly aiming to achieve very different things. Yes, all music wants to be made to be the best it can, but all music isn't trying to be the best at one thing. While I hold that ideology to this day, and I strongly refrain from trivial comparisons or numerical ratings, Crash of Rhinos' *Distal* had flipped these thoughts on their head. 16 months after first moving on to *Distal*, my love and appreciation for this album has only grown. Before it had made no sense to have anything stick out so far above the rest, but perhaps it was just unlikely rather than impossible. I'm still somewhat in awe that it could have happened, but after hundreds of scrutinizing listens, there still is not a single moment on this record that rings at less than 100%. Most uniquely of all, my growing appreciation for *Distal* was far more gradual than it was for most of the albums I vehemently stand by. I specifically remember not feeling like I had retained everything in the first few listens and not having any strong sense of adoration for it instantly, like I have the vast majority of the time. Yet it piqued my interest in a way that had never really happened before. I wasn't drowning in ecstasy from it nor forcing myself to make an effort to listen. I was very drawn to keep listening to the record, but from an angle of fascination rather than awe. I didn't have much of an opinion at all for a while, but I was continually pulled to listen to it over and over, almost on an exponential slope to the point where a day wouldn't go by without having had that record caress my ears.

While I can analyze endlessly and pay minute attention to the intricacies of the music, I still don't think I'm anywhere near understanding why the sounds of the actual recordings have the effect that they do. I'm plenty raveled up in all sorts of overtly emotional music in many other outlets, but this record strikes a chord that goes to a different, perhaps further, place than the pure sentimental power of so much of the music I admire. Lyrics aside, the energy and intention of *Distal* is constantly explicit in the way it seems to scream out that it is trying as hard as it possibly can. Whether it's the elegance of the arrangement from track to track, or the intuitive flow of sections within a single song, every moment of *Distal* is purposeful. Even on records I would recommend to the end of the earth, there are still parts that go on a bit too long, or ideas that didn't merit as much as attention as they were given. But here, nothing is out of place or filler. Every riff, volume dynamic, and part change echoes with undeniable intent, that it was put there because it was damn well supposed to be. The seeds weren't planted nearest to the rest of the crop or in a clean grid that would be easy to maintain and harvest. They were planted only in the most perfect spots where a goliath would grow, scattered across the field in such an unthinkably organized array that you know the only way someone would have done it was if they'd personally dug up every square inch of dirt and inspected it to no end. There are seven songs. That's all you need. Cut the fat and tighten up the muscles and you're left with a spectacle of strength so efficient and powerful, pushing so hard to keep its hold at the apex of its ability, that it's natural that it could only maintain its true prime for a matter of fourty or so minutes.

The power of this machine is hard to comprehend because the thought of overwhelming power usually is associated with malign dictatorships and sensational displays of aggression, but the power that I'm referring to, the power that is the essence of this album, is far greater than any rash display. It doesn't need to sit at 230 bpm to feel fast and they don't need to play hyper-technical parts to make their execution seem difficult or impressive. By the same token, it doesn't need to be loaded with reverb pedals and ten-minute drone builds to be evocatively beautiful or tender. The power that Crash of Rhinos displays is all in their choices, and that with every movement, the striking qualities are just as much in what they've done as they are in the things they don't need to do. It seems as though Crash of Rhinos recorded this album wondering, if this was it, their

only shot, that their existence could only be encapsulated in fourty minutes of music, what would they do? And instead of trying to cram every single greatest idea and possibility in, they choose one path and see to it that they go stunningly far. Power is control and the mastery that comes with it is incredibly subtle, particularly on the first listen, but it is what makes the difference hundreds of listens later.

Distal is performed by a drummer, two bassists, and two guitarists, all of whom contribute vocally. From start to finish, there is an unwavering commitment to this format. What you hear is what you would get in a live setting played by actual people, and that gives it an incredibly tangible, plausible feel. Because of the absence of overdubs, additional instrumentation, and a guiding click track when recording, the album resembles an impressive performance (think theater) more distinctly than it might resemble a carefully crafted and adjusted work (think painting). Now, this is coming from someone who has consumed a vast amount of electronic music in the last few years, which is a world built on extensive manipulation. There is no point in comparing the approaches, but I'm pointing to the psychological effect of a piece's qualities in these regards, be it completely un-manipulated, overtly controlled, or somewhere mixed up in between. What Crash of Rhinos' *Distal* does is something entirely feasible and while this “realness” has no significance in terms of ideology, it is worth discussing because it has a direct impact on the way we perceive the music. I'm the last person to argue there is some sort of purity to live musicians that cannot be achieved with post-production or completely non-live music, but there is a difference. For example, when overhearing a minimal electronic-production pop anthem with hard tuned super crisp vocals over a restaurant speaker system, our minds react in a different way than they would if they were passively listening to a friend in the room practice acoustic guitar. Until we grow up with digital synthesizers in place of talking and have daywear multiband compression and match eq earplugs, the distinction will always be deeply ingrained into our psyches. The audio information we take in on a daily basis sounds very different from even the best foley artists and sound engineer's work on a high budget film. This doesn't mean one is superior to the other, but that our brain's' interpretation of the audio is not objective and we listen with a bias for each. Otherwise, there would be no problems with them becoming complicated and confused with one another. If you suddenly heard that same acoustic guitar-playing friend in the room perfectly cut from one note to the next at a constant rate of thirty-two changes per second, only including the meat of the note (attack of the pick and artifacts of moving hand up and down fretboard completely removed), your brain would be quite surprised. Now, if you heard that while listening to something through speakers or headphones, you probably wouldn't bat an eye. The point is that at a deeply subconscious level, our expectations of what we're listening to depend on the context. While it may be impressively bewildering, no one expects the acoustic guitar player to chop around at high speeds like a computer or sampler could, just in the same way, no one is expecting to hear a real, unmodified voice coming out of that restaurant speaker.

In the case of *Distal*, the album's realistic essence amplifies its impact. The preciseness of how the music was presented, both in its recording and post-production, signals a number of subconscious cues we have that are responsible for determining something is real. With many thanks to the mixing, which could likely be considered unorthodox in today's rock music climate, *Distal* maintains a sense of reality throughout. The snare hits are incredibly dynamic from hit to hit and are occasionally buried and muddied by the wall of guitars on its softer strikes. The vocals strain to stay on pitch and struggle to keep steadied because of their high volume. The tempo slightly jets up at moments of increasing intensity and naturally lowers when that tension releases.

The album's success in these regards isn't necessarily a criticism on modern recording and production; there are plenty of albums where I love that perfection only attainable through unnaturally wide stereo image, impossibly consistent dynamics, and a painstakingly clean and tight low end. This route isn't necessarily superior, but it is remarkably unique. Instead of embracing fabricated perfection, *Distal* boasts just how deliberate and fully realized the tracks are in their raw state. Maurizio Borgna, the recording and mixing engineer for this record, tends to follow this approach to production quite frequently across his work, but in contrast with the other records I have heard from his, while all sounding lovely, I can't help but feel like *Distal* was meant to be more uninhibited than others. However, this doesn't mean Borgna left the tracks untouched, tweaked some levels, and called it a day. While it may be subtle, the mixing job on *Distal* is quite certainly a conscientious and effective one. In post-production, there is a common mentality that if the listener thinks that no post-processing adjustments were made, their job has been done successfully. Transparency in a mix can be a noble goal, but

most of the engineers who preach this mantra are putting out hyper-compressed mixes that have been slowly creeping closer and closer towards a totally flat frequency spectrum. Because this illusion has been intricately established in such a persuasive way, one might initially assume this record hasn't been touched at all, given the increasing influence of post-production in the modern music climate and the normativity of its use. A key aspect of restraint in *Distal*'s engineering is its abstinence from tampering down the recordings' dynamic inconsistencies and preventing the instruments from bleeding over one another. Although it may be unusual compared to its contemporaries, the post-production on *Distal* lets these realistic imperfections persist.

Throughout the album, there is a constantly prevalent use of compression that reflects the ears' natural psychoacoustic adaptiveness to loudness. In many situations of recorded music, an album can become flat and boring simply because it has been recorded and mixed so accurately and cleanly that, when it is heard at lower listening levels, it loses some of its life. Usually in a live environment, because of the severe volume, the ears adjust relatively and will slowly return to an increased sensitivity during the quieter parts and compensate again to duck the volume when things become very loud. As much as engineering likes to bring the audio to a point of controlled neutrality, the neutral point of human hearing is somewhat biased in this regard and the mixing and mastering of *Distal* takes a genius account of this. When listened at a comfortably loud level, which *Distal* invites with its relatively dull frequency balance, the compression simulates this psychoacoustic compensation for loudness, bringing forth a natural energy and warmth to the recording. Despite the presence of this compression, it sounds transparent because of how our auditory organs are tricked to believe they are reacting in accordance to it. The occasional rising volume of the cymbals during stripped back moments and sudden ducking of guitars when the drums punch in feels natural and appealing. This is a tactic rarely employed this deliberately, because so often compression is a tool for taming micro-dynamics and amplifying the overall volume, both of which aren't happening here in a typical way. These are just a few examples of the subtle but inexplicably profound engineering work that takes this album to the next level.

Additionally, every piece of the equation has a frequency balance so perfect within its context that it seems nothing has been done to make it the way it is. The guitars have a richness that never sounds either too tinny and weak or too muffled with low-end resonance, walking a tightrope of pristine sonic symmetry. The cymbals' washy quality adds a great deal of power and roominess to the entire performance. Without falling victim to the kicks triggering of mix bus compression, or being cut off an extra 1000 hz too high, the massiveness of the cymbals offer a great deal of warmth to the collage of sound without overweighing anything in a manner too dark or blurring. In its entirety, the drum kit sits so effortlessly with the other components, supporting the energy and movement of the music, but also cutting into the foreground at its most vigorous moments with tremendous drive. The way this snare cracks with supreme sharpness in the midrange is completely unforgettable and one of the most compelling parts of this album's character. Every element is praiseworthy for the way it was refined, bass and vocals included, but at the end of the day, this genius in subtlety by Maurizio Borgna would all be for not if the performance he recorded wasn't executed in such an exceptionally stirring manner.

Regarding the album's structure, the coordination and compatibility of *Distal*'s seven songs is impeccable and seems unbreakable from their place amongst each other. Despite the lack of seamless transitions, the changes from one track to another are clear and unmistakable, flowing into one another with incredible synergy. The dependence between them is so clear that you couldn't listen to any of the first six tracks on their own without wincing with tremendous dissatisfaction when your ear's expectations aren't met with hearing the lead-in to the next song. The final notes of "Big Sea" hang at a melodic high, fluttering about harmoniously as any remaining residual tension dissipates with the fade of the guitars. Begging for their flight to be interrupted, the crunchy and brutish opening riff of "Stiltwalker" pulls the mood back down with raucous haste. With the same need for continuation, the final line of "Gold on Red" rings out with a subtle dissonance that cries for the punch of the snare to kick in "Closure," where the intro's heavy hitting unison answers the latter track's "Are we done yet?" with firm action.

Relevant to these two songs, something so beautiful about *Distal*'s track order is the songs' cooperation in building intensity. Upon my first listens, one of the most striking features of the track sequence was the way that the admirably exhausting emotional high points of "Gold on Red" were topped off and followed by "Closure." From the drummer Oliver Craven's impassioned vocal delivery in the final verse of the song, "Gold on

Red" then flows into a hard hitting rhythmic breakdown, which is only to come before another entirely different, but equally intense instrumental passage coming after it. As the track meets it end with a trail of soft feedback, repeating staccato lines from now-clean guitars, and the unmasking of the drum kit's shimmering reverb in the song's more minimal final minute, before any conclusion can be found in the final fade, it slams into "Closure," a tune with an even more aggressive and dire energy than the last. The group busts out all of the stops, working in their strongest synchronistic harmony to hit tight rhythmic emphases and again scream together at the top of their lungs, all occurring over a clamor of gritty guitar riff-age galore. Uniquely, after the fade of the final refrain of "Closure," a two minute interlude swells in, pensively resetting the atmosphere in preparation for the final track: "Asleep," a song so beautiful and persuasive that it manages to convey its essence of poignant conclusiveness every listen. To put it analogously, if the first few songs of *Distal* were slowly waking up in the morning, "Gold on Red" and "Closure" would be the onset of night that calls to pick up the pace, and "Asleep" is the dramatic final epiphany that can only be achieved in the exhausted late hours.

This brings focus to another hugely important aspect of this album, primarily existing lyrically but also made apparent in its musical mood. With track titles like "Wide Awake" and "Asleep," there is certainly an element of this album that represents and points attention to the dynamics of a single day, but perhaps also to the timeline of life. Maybe I'm extrapolating too much, but over the last few months I've found an impressing number of parallels between the way a day plays out and how I would speculate that an entire lifetime unfolds. One sense of that was that I feel like, the longer I stay awake, the more I become mentally awake, passionate, and farsighted in my worldview. Sometimes, I have intense realizations or moments of feeling that I was finally putting the pieces together very late at night, and as soon as I fall asleep, it all goes away. While I usually still remember what I realized, or did, or set out to do the night before, the passion, those core emotional feelings that came with it, is erased. It seems that the mind is designed to reset everyday when you wake up. Sometimes we need the reset to start fresh with a level-headed outlook, but a lot of times, I feel that it is setting me back, stifling the progress of my broader mental connections. Another parallel is that in the first ten to twenty years of life, as well as the first few hours of the day, there is a gentleness and freshness to the way we think and behave that corresponds with our minimal experience, but as we grow older, or as the day goes on, things begin to wear on us, and we see the greater consequences of living so leisurely. So as things continue on, the imminent reality of reaching the end becomes clearer and we react by either becoming hastier or by giving up. Equally relevant, the urgency of the album seems to increase continually the longer it goes on, just the way I think it does in life and a single day. I can't say for sure whether Crash of Rhinos are referring to all of these ideas, but I definitely think there is something to be said for the fact that this album ends with the lyrics, "We're always parting ways / we fall asleep." Sleep or, in

a larger sense, death, always forces us to part ways.

Another essential motif of this album and so much of the other work from the band's previous incarnations is the self-referential reflection on their personal struggles in sustaining an existence as musicians. Sure enough, as Richard Birkin mentioned in our interview on Vigils, there is difficulty in trying to create a life where you can make music. A previous band of Crash of Rhinos members Paul Beal, Richard Birkin, and Jim Cork, known as The Little Explorer made their final effort in 2006 with *Siderali*, an album that wouldn't see the light of the day until many years later, the writing of which coincided the group's disbandment. Due to those circumstances of having awareness for their impending inability to continue, so much of the album seems to be lyrically built around this theme of failure and acceptance of the end. Consider the following lines:

> Our hopelessness depends on definitions of success
> -"Lamp Shades for Neo-Tokyo"

> You failed to mean what we meanted when we started
> Intentions were all for the best
> Into the face of progress we stand like statues
> Expressions are worn away the same
>
> And all this to remind us of the best mistake that we have made
> . . .
> So light this fire
> Watch this career
> Burn friends
> -"Global Nod"

I bring this up because all of these themes prove to carry over to *Distal* and return as new revelations. Throughout, there is an attitude in the lyrics that their desire to return and play music together again is one that may be damaging and unsustainable. Getting the crew back together feels like it is a mistake, but Crash of Rhinos decides that it is a mistake worth making.

> Where was that luck when we needed it?
> . . .
> This time it all seems right
> -"Big Sea"

> Built into my past
> Signals for my future failing
> -"Stiltwalker"

> So watch as we untie
> And then float away
> This time for certain
> To never return again
> I think this sounds familiar
> Have we said this before?
> Does this sound familiar?
> -"Asleep"

I don't want to dwell excessively on the lyrics, because I believe their analysis is an especially interpretative experience that any listeners should embark on alone. However, so much of why *Distal* feels like it genuinely matters lyrically is interconnected with the emotions of the music. It is because *Distal* is a long-term analysis and a biopic on a decade's thematic resonances. It is an amalgamation of those many years of experience, as musicians and as people. This reflective outlook works well for the content musically and lyrically, because it isn't just a result of a day, a week, or a month. It's not about some fleeting romance, or a single

violent outburst. I think *Distal* became the masterpiece of unforgiving commitment and impressive desperation that it is because it is a byproduct of looking at life as a bigger picture. This is an assessment on their last ten years of struggling to make their music work and just as importantly struggling to make life work. After all, many connections in life can't become solidified or obviously apparent until they've reoccurred enough times for us to notice their pattern. Again, this corresponds with why I think great knowledge can sometimes only be obtained at the end of lifetime in the same way that it can only be reached at the end of a long day, because of how ideas and experiences connect together and stack upon each other to build more complex and universal understandings. Fitting enough, the group concludes "Closure" with a supremely powerful line that is, per usual, roared in tandem: "Forced in by and through repetition." In many circumstances, such a convincing musical performance can't come without an immense emotional weight. Music and life are an interconnected relationship and the stress of one will show in the other. I think this is a telling explanation for why things ramp up to such a severe immediacy and vigor with this album particularly. It is all on the line on *Distal*, because by taking part in the process, they are also indirectly choosing a familiar path of suffering and failing in the real world. But the bright side that has drawn them back to it is that despite these failures, they understand that they will succeed much further in other domains.

Moreover, I believe this urgency reflects the choices, deliberate or natural, to give the band the character that it had, because musically, their previous bands The Little Explorer and The Jesus Years resembled each other much more than they ever would of Crash of Rhinos. Likely due to this heightened sense of momentousness, the project's design pivoted around the need to apply as much effort as they could, as often as they could. The most notable change that reflects this is that every member sings. And instead of the softly caressing and vulnerable vocals that existed on much of The Little Explorer's material, this time around, they yell. While all of the vocals are completely melodic, these musicians aren't sparing any mercy with how they aggressively they push their voices to their physical limit, their absolute fullest potential. Simply put, it is literally the loudest and most crucial cry that they can make. They've gone through the motions enough to understand that if they are going to do this again, they need to up the ante and make the most substantial amassment of racket they can.

Because of its magnificence as a human effort, I wish I could go on endlessly assembling explanations of what this album achieved. I am forever awestruck by the energy that carries through on this project and its embodiment of the do or die mentality. Crash of Rhinos' *Distal* is a musical statement, without a doubt, however, just like everything is implicitly in some way, it is just as much a statement on life; its ability to fulfill maximum potential in both arenas is the source of its prestige.

http://crashofrhinos.bandcamp.com
https://facebook.com/crashofrhinos
https://twitter.com/crashofrhinos

Distal was released on April 1, 2011, and is available for free download through Crash of Rhinos's Bandcamp. Additionally, there is a live recording of the band performing the album in full by BeatCast on YouTube.

Crash of Rhinos were Paul Beal, Richard Birkin, Jim Cork, Oliver Craven, and Ian Draper. After releasing their second album, *Knots*, in 2013, they disbanded a year later.

Outro

Personal Writing #3

The creation of music is a beautiful process that deserves to be talked about and explored endlessly. Anyone who has personally slaved over a song or album can tell you firsthand that the experience of being consumed by creating yields a weight that may not always be apparent at the end of the road, when their efforts are condensed down and played off in a matter of minutes. In music and in life, the journey is just as essential as the destination, a mantra I try to keep in mind as I go through the journey of creating what will eventually be, to you, a single piece. Part of what makes an album, song, or any other piece of art so fascinating is that its existence is concrete proof of its creator's journey to make it. The view from the mountain's peak has been captured and it is because someone else scaled the cliff. However, music's constant reference to a traveled path goes beyond farsighted deliberateness.

For instance, let's say we take away the months of studio stress and tireless writing, and a masterpiece has been recorded completely improvisationally in one fluid take, all in a period of time matching the length of the release in its finished form. Even the sound engineers achieved a magnificent mix completely on the fly, neurotically riding faders and running around hurriedly to tweak processing parameters. Even if the entire final output was realized without any previous design, still, this piece implies an odyssey to reach its glorious end: the immense training required of each player and engineer to have eventually accumulated the mastery in their skills to achieve such a demanding feat on the spot. Their success is a sum of all of their efforts in their associated disciplines. If the hypothetical deconstructs even further, stripping away the insinuation that the performance is only attainable with years of previous practice, it still fails to eradicate the presence of a journey. Instead, it just makes this journey shorter. Given any human could sit down with no prior knowledge necessary and instantaneously write and perform music at a transparently professional level, the destination is — in the same way as before — just a reflection of the voyage. Now, the journey, the process of creation, has been narrowed down to only whatever occurred within the moments of the performance. Although the time of intention has minimized dramatically in length, the recorded performance that has become the album still warrants the same amount of action and intent that any other specific performance that made it to the final cut of a song or album would have, even if it took years of instrumental practice, trial-error experimentation and religious rehearsing preceding it. When the scope is zoomed completely in, to focus only on the exact recorded takes that make it onto an album, the aforementioned hypothetical of a spontaneously conceived, yet perfectly executed recording doesn't look any different from the more standard scenario that implies thousands of hours of development contributing to its realization. In both cases, there is a finite set of recorded parts that made it to the album. They both end up as a single, solitary creation. If the final take heard on the record is “perfect” in both cases, there's nothing that can perceptually explain or distinguish whether or not that single take that made it was amongst hundreds of others or alone.

Now, it seems all that is left to hold up this theory of destination implying a journey is
the intent, the fact that even in the previous hypothetical, the completely improvised recording was not an accident. It still happened because of the aspiration and ambition to create it: the desire to embark. So, in order to avoid these elements of deliberateness altogether, what would happen if humanity was removed from the scenario entirely? At first thought, my mind drifted towards music made entirely by machines, but accordingly, that came with problems of its own. Given the complex programming required to be able to generate original compositions, the systems that those computers or machines run would still have to have been designed and conceptualized by some person, which brings us back to effort before the final performance contributing to its result. On the other hand, even an artificial intelligence whose programming and understanding is completely self-conceived would suggest the same implications of intent that a standard human would.

The only way for intent and purpose to be completely removed from music, in hopes to find a destination without a journey, is for the music to have truly been an accident. As interesting a punch line as it may be for aleatoric composition to save the day, chance music won't steal the limelight, because even chance music strongly indicates intent and preceding effort to actually set out in making something occur randomly in the first place.

As chance driven and accidental as the music may be, someone decided to make it, which isn't very accidental at all. Alas, the most instantaneously present, unintentional, and non-referential pieces of music that can exist occur organically in the sounds of nature, the ones that can catch your attention just right. It's that haphazard, rare moment where you're engulfed in your present environment and the sudden creaking of a nearby armchair or the rhythm of flapping papers that have been blown away by a sudden gust of wind strikes you as unexpectedly musical. These moments are unusual, but their infrequency and ephemeral nature is exactly what allows them to exist. Be it the fluttering of leaves, the entrancing drone of a stream's currents, or the occasional resonances from a gentle breeze briskly circulating in the curvature of your ear canal amidst piercing quiet, the familiar mental connections of rhythm and melody can be ignited by very unsuspecting circumstances. Their sudden origination triggers the synapses that are accustomed to deciding, "That's music" quickly and involuntarily enough that one never has to actively spend time contemplating the moment's musical legitimacy. A simple moment of appreciation for natural sounds can provide an awareness for just how operative and active everything always is, and particularly, how incessantly perpetual that activity is. Even among these natural cases of discovering music, the journey is still an indispensable aspect of music's dichotomy. The papers noisy descent off the table and towards the ground isn't music until the second or third flutter happens in just a way that their relationship and timing to the first makes sense rhythmically. At its core, music is inseparable from the experience that makes it.

To elaborate, another unique distinction can be made between the sonic and visual arts concerning when a work is considered complete. In most cases in the visual arts, a finished piece is static. The journey is the evolution of the piece's creation, how it was nourished from blank space to vivid imagery over the course of countless hours of remarkably precise actions. This journey almost always belongs solely to the artist. Meanwhile, music comes to be by a process of dynamics and constant change. There can never be a piece of music that exists at a length of zero seconds. While images can capture single moments in time, audio captures movements and activities occurring over a span of time. Just innately, by being music at all, the medium is a journey in and of itself.

While numerous factors can bring new life to music and add dimensions to the journey, music, in its naked and pure form, is changing and traveling. With all of the human ideas dismantled from it, it still manages to tell stories. All within the abstractness of sound, the elements of impermanence and transformation happen entirely nonverbally. These intangible connections relate clearly to many of the connections made in life, especially those that are understood before they can be spoken. Music is incapable of stopping in any single moment of time, imprisoned in a world of continuous motion and fluidity, but so are we.

In light of consumer zero's first installment, the voyages of life and music, and this issue's acknowledgement of Crash of Rhino's *Distal*, the final lines of its opening track, "Big Sea," offer an appropriate conclusion:

Our favorite part is not how this ends
It's just how this starts
And just that it starts

Credits

Thank you to the photographers who provided us with images to use.

Visual Contributions

SCAN (Alarmist photos | pg. 4 top, 6-13)
http://afghaniscan.com

Sam Bothun (mathbonus photos | pg. 4 bottom, 14-20, back)
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Gavin Brooks (misc. | front, pg. 21-22, 24-27)
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Jyoti Mishra (Crash of Rhinos photos | pg. 5 bottom, 41-43)
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Vigils
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Distal
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Glossary

click track - a steady metronome musicians listen to while recording in order to help them play more in time
Coachella - a very large music festival in the United States
compression - a tool that decreases the volume of something only when it exceeds a certain loudness
demoing - recording in order to store ideas only, preliminary to actual recording; might be played imperfectly or recorded in poor quality, because the purpose is just to keep track of ideas
discography - the collective works of a composer/musician/band
hz - "hertz"; a measurement of sound frequencies; usually ranging from 20 (lower pitch) to 20,000 hz (higher pitch)
Logic - a computer program used to write, record, edit, and post-process music
limiting - like a compressor, but more aggressive and fast in response; prevents anything from exceeding a specified volume
limiting artifacts - audible distortion and other usually unintented remnants that can occur as a result of using a limiter; usually occuring when the limiter is used very aggresively to achieve a louder output
listening levels - the volume at which one listens to music
mastering - the final step in processing recorded music and also the most subtle; mastering often is used to make songs across a release sound like they belong together better; refers to the stage where tools are used to affect the mix as a whole
MIDI - this colloquially refers to the process of inputting musical notes into a computer (so that they can be played by a virtual instrument of some kind)
mixing - the main step in processing recorded music; during this process a variety of tools are used to control and alter elements individually and together in groups; mixing helps specific instruments of a recording sound better individually and helps them sound clearer in each other's presence
mix bus - a place where numerous instruments are routed to so that they can all be processed together as a group
psychoacoustic - relating to how the brain understands sound
sample - an audio clip, sometimes taken from an external source

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