

Devendra Banhart  
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Watching folk singer Devendra Banhart mature as a musician is like watching someone getting younger and older at the same time. With the release of his fifth album, *Smokey Rolls Down Thunder Canyon*, one notices the deepening voice of a twenty-six year old man who constantly pushes his creative potential to seek solace in a chaotic world. As Banhart's music gets more lyrically sophisticated and experimental within Latin and American Pop music forms, it manages to remain as playful and jubilant as the first songs he recorded through answering machines and on four-tracks for his debut, *Oh Me Oh My The Way The Day Goes By The Sun Is Setting Dogs Are Dreaming Lovesongs Of The Christmas Spirit*. His sense of humor gets sharper and stranger, while his improvisational skills are still as shockingly fluid and free as a child's. Banhart has an urgent need to spread positivity and calm as a reminder that ecstasy still exists amongst political upheaval. Given his pliable sense of time and lighthearted, communal approach to music making, he makes a contagious argument that is difficult to dismiss.

Banhart, who lives in Los Angeles but grew up in Venezuela, has accumulated an international, cult-like status among fans who worship him as the new musician responsible for ushering in renewed hope for peace as inspiration for political action, both on individual and on massive scales. In America, this musical movement, loosely dubbed "Freak Folk," has gained significant momentum as members of youth culture become increasingly incensed with imperialism and look to Hippie-era social collectives for political strategies to encourage good art borne out of dissent. Devendra Banhart manages to ditch this clichéd retro nostalgia for a sound that embraces 1960's counterculture, but, that like his folk-singing heroes, is culled from current culture. As more and more fans claim him the head of a new folk movement, Banhart handles the pressure by ignoring clichéd definitions of folk and simply trying to improve his craft, while also channeling the attention towards playing benefit concerts for specific causes such as Native American rights and AIDS awareness. On stage especially, he is at home, calmly spreading his messages of harmony and universal connection to the thousands he sings to, for what has become a constant tour that has now spanned nearly three years.

*Smokey Rolls Down Thunder Canyon* is perhaps Banhart's most political album to date, not particularly for its lyrics but for its many tracks which reference Tropicalismo, the 1960s Brazilian movement that combined music, art, and writing into politically radical statements against government oppression. Recorded in Topanga Canyon, a small beach town outside Los Angeles known to have hosted previous folk music residents, such as Joni Mitchell, the album was made in an eccentric, collective environment similar to those that might have spawned classic Tropicalia albums like the compilation *Ou Pan et Circencis*, on which musicians took turns songwriting and contributing to various degrees. Though Banhart has always championed Tropicalia musicians like Os Mutantes, Caetano Veloso, or Gal Costa, his songwriting methods for this new album were based more heavily on notions of "cannibalizing," or stealing and recombining myriad cultural styles to create something new, absurd, and politically fresh. This energetic acceptance of input also has manifested as a full band backing someone who began as a solo acoustic singer.

I had the good fortune of having interviewed Devendra for *Arthur Magazine* back in 2005, for what may have been his first cover feature. As an interviewee, Devendra Banhart still employs that Tropicalismo spirit, often obviously making up stories that disregard reality but serve to illustrate deeper feelings he wishes to express. He jokingly redirects interview questions, or takes liberties to digress onto topics he feels more pertinent. We met up in San Francisco, following his two shows at Palace of Fine Arts, a beautiful amphitheater whose seats Devendra felt squelched desires to dance. The first night, Banhart not only invited the audience to stand and dance, but also invited them up on the stage! When an audience member stole a cherished bracelet of his and bravely returned it in front of the entire crowd, Banhart rewarded her courage by gifting the object back. These interactions establish a community during each concert, which is indicative of Devendra Banhart's lifestyle and his love of art making.

TD: Do you write songs on tour?

DB: We write song *titles* on tour, sometimes record a thing or two, but I really need to be alone in my own space. Being on tour is like a strip club, you never feel alone.

TD: Have you been touring forever? It seems like you haven't even had a break.

DB: I've been touring for three years straight. I mean the longest break has been a month or something. We just finished the record, then we met up for three weeks in Europe, played mostly festivals. We had two days off, then came to play the Pacific shore. We don't even know what time off is. When I'm off, I like to keep up a healthy surfing lifestyle. Greg (Rogrove) surfs, and I watch him surf.

TD: At your show the other night, I noticed how many of your songs, like "Seahorse," are about relinquishing possessions. Then there was that incident where the girl stole your bracelet, returned it, and you gave it back to her.

DB: I can't believe she did that! That was Buffalo Turquoise. I had to give it to her. I really appreciated that she took it and was brave enough to give it back. She was really on the spot.

TD: Does this criticizing of the world's materialism come from touring all the time? You can't really travel with much.

DB: It is amazing, the amount of stuff you lose, end up giving away, or trading. Touring reminds you that things are impermanent. It's like one big sand painting. But that song, "Seahorse" is more about reincarnation. It's about this person's claim that they don't need anything in the world, but then his subconscious kicks in, and his many voices within come through. It's better to know that you gave somebody something as opposed to having your belongings distributed after you die. You have the opportunity to do something good while alive rather than hoarding it all.

TD: Isn't music all about that? It's a form of art that deemphasizes the material, the physical. Is that your attraction to music?

DB: Well, my experience with music is extremely physical. It takes me to another world. There's a physical world within me. Music totally alters that physical world. I visualize while listening, which is pretty physical. Speaking of Spain, we got an invitation to play a show at the Lorca Foundation. We'd be writing a song based on his poems. I don't know what happened with that...but that was something great that maybe was going to take place in Spain. Do you eat ham?

TD: Ham? Yeah, I love ham.

DB: Jamon. All you can eat in Spain is ham. Even their iPods are made of ham. (laughs)

TD: Do you think some songs on this new album are Grateful Dead influenced, like "So Long Old Bean?"

DB: That song is Sun-era Elvis, meets Harry Nilsson. Nilsson was the point. "Seahorse" could be Grateful Dead influenced a little bit. My favorite thing about the Grateful Dead is the way they open songs in such a fractured way. They each play their own thing, then link up. It's all about the live Dead, "Dark Star."

TD: That's what I was getting at. Your acoustic playing versus the full band is quite different. With the band, there's the power of everyone coming in at the same time, following a quiet section in a song.

DB: (Looking down at his beard.) How did all this food get into my beard? There are definite consistencies that I feel come through regardless of whether I play with a band or not. And the band now is so different than the transitional band I used to play with. Finally, we're reaching the point that when we're really focused, we can have a conversation musically, vibrationally, and psychically. We can choose to stretch songs out, give them more space. "Seahorse" can be a twenty-minute song if we want. Having that space in music is my goal.

TD: An architectural space?

DB: Yeah, exactly. But we haven't exercised that enough yet. It's so precious that that we can jive with each other, and still everyone has their own priorities. My priority is making my art and writing songs. Greg (Rogrove)'s priorities are writing his songs for his band, Priestbird. Noah (Georgeson) is producing and making his own record. Andy (Cabic)'s got Vetiver and we're doing the label Gnomonsong together. Lucky (Remington)'s writing, there's Pete (Newsom) and Eliza, who's selling merchandise on this tour, is usually in the band, but she's taking time off to work on her record.

TD: That reminds me of something you said in the documentary, *The Eternal Children*, about the first time you heard Vashti Bunyan's album, *Just Another Diamond Day*. You

compared the music to architectural space, like your bed, your house. I hadn't thought of space within music before.

DB: That brings it back to that physical thing. Music is a substitute for space. It's a form of nourishment. You can be surrounded by a zillion people but when you put on a great song, you're gone. You're on your own.

TD: Do you think singing in Spanish lends itself better to physicality? Spanish is your first language, right? Is Spanish a more romantic language?

DB: Spanish and English are equal for me, really. If we'd been talking about this during *Nino Rojo*, I would have said definitely yes, Spanish is more romantic. Previously, my more direct songs were in Spanish, and my psychedelic ones were in English. There's been a reversal on this record. "Carmencita" has the most psychedelic lyrics. That wasn't a conscious thing, and a big part of it happens while collaborating with the creative spirit, which resides outside of ourselves. Spanish is offering something more animistic, more pre-Carnaval. But in general, yes, Spanish lends itself to those romantic songs. Mexican music, mariachi music, is about broken hearts. Salsa, merengue, cumbia, it's all either about relationships or about the drug lords who bribe the musicians to write songs about them!

TD: What about the Brazilian musical forms you're working in on this new album? The samba, or Tropicalismo, Os Mutantes sound? Are all of these songs about people and romance? You are now known as an artist who deemphasizes people in your songs. Your songs have been about relationships with nature, or animals.

DB: Bossa nova, or samba, they have their typical lyrical themes. But Tropicalismo is based on taking something like a German polka about drinking and turning it into a love song about sneakers. There's that anthropophagic notion of taking from all cultures. Building those cultures upon your foundation, your culture. For me, I suppose that's South America. It's all about playing with archetypes. "Samba Vexillographica" is almost like blues. I thought it'd be funny to have a samba about flags, and vexillography is the study of flags.

As I make more music, I pay more attention to the music itself. In the beginning, it was all about the lyrics. Now, I try to write lyrics to match the music. For example, I wanted to write an homage to doo wop, blues, ska, reggae, rocksteady, high life, mento, and Judaism, so we wrote "Shabop Shalom," to see if those worlds could fit together. Eliot, the manager, was in a doo wop band, called The Crest Tones, so I imagined a young, Jewish kid in the 50s hanging out with Frankie Valle.

TD: What about "Tonado Yanomaminista?" You said during your concert the other night that it was written about your experience with the Yanomami people?

DB: Yeah. We were in Brasil, and we had a couple days off so we drove to this place called Piedra Azul, a giant rock covered in blue moss. We got lost, and we ran into this Yanomami hangout. It wasn't a traditional Yanomami village, they were wearing old

sneakers and stuff. I communicated as best I could with my Portuguese and Spanish. They were doing Yopo, and they gave us a little, then told us to follow the stork. A stork appeared. We started heading back, and this stork escorted us, walking in front of us, waiting for us to catch up. It led us back to camp. No, just kidding! I just made that up! Here's another version: The women's army corp came out to find us. We all turned into one boar. A macaw flew by, and we became the macaw, and the macaw became the women's army corps. Imagine twenty women the shape of a macaw. Wait! That should be our next video!

One time, I had this gong, and I made a rope sculpture on it that connected into a pentagram. I showed it to Noah and said, "Look, a gongagram." And at the same time he said, "Pentagong." (laughs) I like gongagram, it's more gongagrammatic.

TD: Do you live in Topanga now?

DB: Yeah, Poontanga. I don't know where that came from, it just came out. Like Tapiopanga.

TD: How is living in a canyon? Is your association with the new record forever linked to the place since you made it there?

DB: Yeah, it was intense. Nineteen people, working at all hours, very intense.

TD: Was it like Frank Zappa's Houdini House?

DB: Oh, we almost moved into that house! But it's different now. It doesn't feel good anymore. The house is unbelievable, though. There's a tree that grows inside it, and one of the rooms is underwater. There's a lake, so you look out the window and you see water. My house is perfect, but nothing works. I need to call a plumber.

TD: The canyon life is such a part of Los Angeles, how can you describe it to people across the globe?

DB: It's like living in the sky above the ocean. Living above the ocean, with wind energy. It's unchanged. It's a chance to be somewhere old. In Spain, you're the ham man, and in Topanga, you're the rock man. It's easy to make the transition from terrestrial to celestial.

TD: Going back to that idea of space, and about writing songs that reflect your state of mind, like the Yanomami story, are most of your songs now about particular live experiences? Or do you have recurring themes that you try to get across repeatedly?

DB: Definitely both. There are topics that recur. They keep popping up, I keep returning to them, I write about them, try to decipher them, think that I have, then they are reconfigured into my life puzzle once again, disguised as something new. But in the end, it's about the thirst, the search, to demystify or uncover something that shouldn't be uncovered. It should be *almost* uncovered but never completely uncovered. That's the creative process.

TD: Your recurring topic seems to be that time is subjective. In songs and interviews, you often speak about how time is not a solid, linear thing, because your interpretation of an experience is changeable. That's why you can tell the Yanomami story in several different ways, for example.

DB: Yes. I think of songwriting or painting as something that already exists, but that's covered under fifteen veils. I can determine the rate at which it's uncovered. I try to go with the flow, to balance the creation rate with the microcosmos, my inner world, and the macrocosmos, the outside world. Once I get down to the fourth veil, let's say, I have to start considering when to stop, so the art can unveil itself. I don't know why I feel that way, but that's how it is. By the tenth veil, even more so, it's like, Stop!