

Q&A



Aaron Dessner, Scott Devendorf, Matt Berninger, Bryan Devendorf, Bryce Dessner

THE NATIONAL

Collecting critical raves and fans the old-fashioned way—one at a time

THEY'RE NO OVERNIGHT SENSATION, but over the course of nearly 15 years and a half-dozen albums, New York indie-rockers the National have reached impressive critical and commercial heights. As they play high-profile slots at Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza this summer and release their latest album, *Trouble Will Find Me*, the group acknowledges that slow and steady has been key to their success.

"The fact that there wasn't a whole lot of attention at the beginning was helpful for us to figure out how to be a band," says singer and lyricist Matt Berninger. "Also we know how hard it is to get any attention, to win people over one at a time, so we don't take it for granted now that 15,000 people

are coming to our shows. We're well aware how lucky we are, and we're grateful."

Featuring guest spots from Sufjan Stevens, Sharon Van Etten and Annie Clark (St. Vincent), *Trouble Will Find Me* is the follow-up to the National's 2010 album, *High Violet*, their most successful release so far. The band (which uniquely includes two sets of brothers—bassist Scott and drummer Bryan Devendorf, and twin guitarists Aaron and Bryce Dessner) found that album's success relieved some of the pressure when they began writing new songs. Says Berninger, "We ended up working harder and spending more time on this record, but for me particularly, I was in a very peaceful place about it." Berninger gave us his take on

the band's road to success, and its penchant for darkness and humor.

Did you ever expect great success?

No, we didn't expect it. We didn't think much about it, though. For us, the band started in a way that was a fun respite from our day jobs, and playing Mercury Lounge, which holds 250 people, was for us a huge, huge step. That's when we knew we were a real band. The past 14 years as it slowly grew, it's been a strange metamorphosis. There was never a moment when things changed and blew up overnight for us, it just kept growing bigger and bigger. We figured out how to be a good live band. And we figured out how to write

songs and make records together, definitely in the shadows.

Why was it easier to write this time?

Alligator was the first record we released that was signed to a real label. We were desperate for people to notice us, and they did. But we had a lot of anxiety about how to follow that up without painting ourselves into a corner. We knew we wanted to make something that wasn't like *Alligator*, but we didn't want to lose what little attention we had gained. We made *Boxer* work by expanding our style and not repeating ourselves—which was the smartest gamble we ever made. Then with *High Violet*, it was like, OK, we're in the game now, so let's deliver something weird that doesn't sound like the records before it. After touring *High Violet*, we felt we'd planted our flag. It wasn't like we could relax—it was more that we can be whatever kind of band, and write whatever kind of songs, we want. When I was writing for the new album, I wasn't worried about how the record was going to be perceived. I was just writing lyrics without putting it through any kind of self-conscious filters. In a funny way, taking the pressure off the band to be successful made it easier to write songs.

How have your songs' themes and subject matter evolved over the years?

I bet I'm writing about some of the same things I was then. I know *Alligator* was a bitter, angry record in a lot of spots. There were parts of that record that were tense, and some of that's gone. But my preoccupation—social anxiety, the anxiety of trying to be an adult and husband and father, and the anxiety of trying not to be a fool in your life—constantly drives the songs. It's always there. I'm a romantic and I write about the murkier sides of romantic relationships. Not necessarily darker, but complicated. Being married is complicated. Being an adult is complicated. It's not like a switch flips and suddenly you're all straightened out. Everybody stays a bit like a twisted, crooked, glued-together pretzel their whole life—and it's about figuring out how to be responsible, and stay good and kind to the people around you and not be selfish.

Does the band get credit for the depth of humor explored in your songs?

(Laughs) I definitely think the songs have as many funny moments as they do brooding. It's a balance. But for me to say I don't think people get our humor as much as they should just means that I'm not as funny as I think I am. When people listen to us more,

and closer and repeatedly, the different dimensions of our songs reveal themselves. I get why people label us dark or brooding or depressing. It's the most obvious thing when you first hear us because of the sound of my voice or the instrumentation we're using. And when I'm writing I definitely like to wallow in the dark stuff, but often it's also very silly observations about my own neuroses or obsessions. A lot of our songs are about death and the idea of existence, but in kind of funny ways. The song "Humiliation," I think, is really funny, and so is "Graceless."

Did the band work out specific parts for the guests on the new record?

We have friends who are always around, and they come in and just weave their own ideas into our things. With us, it's never a matter of having a guest cameo. On this record,

"Our voices will be mixed together in a weird way." I wanted it to sound like what would be on the radio in the afterlife, and she got into that. Our voices are kind of distorted and mutated into some weird hybrid creation in that section. But it's not like, "Here's Annie Clark in her starring cameo!" People prefer that way because they know they're not just being used for their name; it's because we respect their musicality, and they're friends.

When you reference *Let It Be* on "Don't Swallow the Cap," are you talking about the Beatles or the Replacements?

On "If you want to see me cry / Play *Let It Be* or *Nevermind*"? In a funny way, it could be either one, because all three of those records have a darkness and a sadness attached to them. Members of



Matt Berninger onstage in Budapest, Hungary, 2011

'Taking the pressure off the band to be successful made it easier to write songs.'

Sufjan Stevens, Richard Reed Parry, Sharon Van Etten and Annie Clark are on it—they're doing things, improvising in a way that colors the music. Nona Marie Invie from Dark Dark Dark has a moment where she's on her own on "This Is the Last Time." That was one spot where I needed someone to sing because it sounded too weird to have me overlapping myself, and it needed to be a different person. But on "Humiliation," I talked to Annie and said,

all those bands died. Part of the reason I chose that was because of the rhythm of the titles, but if I had to say which *Let It Be* has more of a place in my brain, it's the Replacements! I've listened to their *Let It Be* far more often than the Beatles', though I love both of those records.

—Eric R. Danton



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