THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

CRITICS PAGE

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INCONVERSATION

WILL EPSTEIN
with Marshall Yarbrough

Will Epstein's music doesn't fit neatly inside any genre. Performing solo as High Water, as a trio with Bladerunner, and alongside frequent collaborators Nicolas Jaar and Dave Harrington, Epstein draws on a diverse array of influences, from John Coltrane and John Zorn on the one hand to contemporary hip-hop production and Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* on the other. When I sat down with Epstein recently, we discussed High Water's 2013 release *The Beautiful Moon EP* and an upcoming full-length. As we spoke, the conversation touched on Bob Dylan, the uncanny quality of loops, and the potential for emotion in electronic music.

Marshall Yarbrough (Rail): Would you like to start by giving a rough sense of your background, where you came from in making music?

Will Epstein: I started playing saxophone when I was 9 years old or so. Saxophone was my main thing for the first 10 years of my musical life. I guess I was kind of going through the motions in the first few years. I liked it, but I wasn't listening to a lot of saxophone music. My teachers kept trying to get me into it and it wasn't always sticking, but in early high school, ninth grade or so, I started listening to Cannonball Adderley and Coltrane and stuff, and once I started listening to the music and getting into it is when it really cracked the thing for me. In fact at that point I got really obsessively into Coltrane and didn't listen to anything else for several years. I mean, eight hours a day. It was crazy.

Will Epstein, Chelsea Hotel, New York, 2014. Photo by Raymond Foye.

Rail: Would you say that up to that point you were playing saxophone, but that this was something separate

from the music you were actually listening to?

Epstein: Yeah. I was super heavy into the Rolling Stones when I was in sixth, seventh, eighth grade—I listened to that one band for three years. I was nuts on the Rolling Stones, and I've been thinking about it a lot recently: what was it about that music that really struck me? I think part of it was the intensity, I really liked this manic intensity of Mick Jagger, I used to imitate him all the time, dance around and stuff. And when I think about getting into Coltrane, to me it was the same thing. I see a very clear link through all these things I've listened to in my life. When I started getting into Coltrane it was that same tribalistic intensity that he's able to enter into that maybe I was attracted to with the Rolling Stones. I got into Bob Dylan also when I was in eighth grade or so. But I was playing the saxophone, so it was sort of a parallel thing. My perspective on Dylan really came by way of playing saxophone and listening to Coltrane. There was a similar intensity and breath control, just a raw intense sound that grabbed me.

Rail: When did you start playing music with other people?

Epstein: I started really getting into playing music in high school. Me and my friend Nico—Nicolas Jaar, who I also still play a lot with—have been friends since we were 9. As kids we'd get together and play video games a lot. I didn't have the best time in high school, I worked really hard but it was a very unartistic place. The second half of high school when we were in 11th grade, I think, Nico and I started jamming together, him on piano, me on sax. That was at the same time when I was really getting deep into Coltrane, and that's really when I started playing seriously. Nico was also already into a lot of electronic music—he was definitely at the cutting edge of a lot of what was going on then. He started making electronic music when he was 15, that was 2005, and there were not a lot of kids doing that then. Unlike now, where you meet a 10-year-old and they're making beats on their computer. So I was hip to the electronic music scene early on through Nico.

Rail: Video games used a lot of electronic-sounding music, were you influenced by that?

Epstein: Not back then, but recently yes. There were a lot of limiting factors for the music at the beginning of video games because the cartridge only had eight bits so you could only use certain frequencies, certain sounds, and then it expanded to 16 and 32… so the restrictions of that format were pretty interesting. Also, a lot of what the music does in these games is it helps lead you somewhere, it helps you discover something, it warns you of something. There's something in the nature of those original video game soundtracks that is very pure. I went on SoundCloud when my record came out and someone made a reference that this one passage sounded like a song from *The Legend of Zelda*. Then I checked it out and it sounded exactly like that, so there must be something subliminal that found its way into my music. I read an interview with Shigeru Miyamoto, the guy who created all the early Nintendo games, and he said he invented these video games to re-create experiences in nature that he had as a kid, playing in the woods and streams, exploring caves, discovering mushrooms. All of *Super Mario Brothers* came out of being in the countryside in Japan. So I think a lot of that music is very evocative of nature, and that part I very much relate to. The *Ocarina of Time* soundtrack is pretty amazing—

Rail: Why did you choose to study electronic music once you were at Brown?

Epstein: It was basically the experimental music section of the music program, so that was what was most appealing to me about it. Emotion wasn't necessarily at the forefront of a lot of the stuff that was being made, but it was a positive environment. I met some cool people who were graduate students in that program, and forged a lot of the connections that I still have. One of the most important musical connections I have is my friend Dave Harrington, who I play with a ton. The first class I took at Brown in the music program was an electro-acoustic improv ensemble, which was super cool, it was taught by a graduate student named Kevin Patton, and he introduced me to Dave, who was working on his thesis, which was on violence and cinema and music—John Zorn and Italian Giallo movies. We became friends and started playing music together but I was just a freshman in college and it felt like he was from a whole other world. I'd go over to his house and he'd have 15 televisions stacked on top of each other with all these crazy Italian horror films playing at the same time. I remember leaving the dorm and walking down the hill a few blocks to another world. I was very grateful that I could have that kind of escape. We formed a group called Spank City—which was a completely fabulous band.

Rail: I ask about electronic music because part of what strikes me in listening to *The Beautiful Moon EP* is that there's a sense of freedom in terms of structure, it's a sort of clipped quality that I think is particularly linked to electronic music and how—as opposed to the more fluid compositional structure of say classical music, or something like the blues where you have a solid 12-bar structure—it allows you to be more disjointed.

Epstein: That's true. It's a different kind of storytelling. I started making electronic music pretty recently, really only a few years ago. I feel like nothing is obvious to me, like the idea of songwriting is not an obvious idea to me. My intuitive way is to look at things more abstractly, for better or worse. I was interested in a linear but kind of circular type of storytelling. I feel like one of the early ways that people made electronic music with tape was very collage-based, sort of a mountain of ideas that coalesced into a story in a certain way.

Rail: Listening to live recordings of you playing with the group Bladerunner, and with Dave Harrington's group, what I hear is this intuitive movement. You might be improvising on one theme for four or five minutes, and then you're intuitively flowing into a different section, and listening to those recordings and then going back and listening to the EP, it seems to me like you're doing the same thing, only where a section on the live recordings might last five minutes and then bleed into something else, on the EP you have an idea contained within a minute, then it'll wash out into something that sounds more ambient and has less of a clear harmonic structure and melody, and then you'll snap back into yet another thing for a minute.

Epstein: There's a lot of electronic music where there's no storytelling going on. And to me storytelling is such an important element to what I do. Something I was very attracted to when I was making electronic music was these cosmic shifts that happen where your perception of what's going on changes drastically—that's something I was working hard at trying to do. But I also want to take care of the listener enough so that they're not confused—or not too confused; they're not just hung out to dry—but also there's a pushing of the mind that I like in that kind of music, where what you assume is going to happen doesn't happen, and it's something more than just surprise—it's not about surprise at all, really. It's about a shifting of consciousness, and that's where the psychedelic aspect comes in. I was thinking about a lot of these things filmically. My favorite thing in movies is when, like in a James

Bond movie, it takes place in like eight different places, there's the Caribbean beach, and then a dark forest, and a hotel penthouse, and it just keeps shifting locations, and all these different colors. For some reason I just loved that, and I was thinking about all these songs as like a camera on a dolly, like a tracking shot in a Wes Anderson movie.

Rail: So the collage ideas you are working with aren't just sounds but styles and genres as well?

Epstein: Yes. The key figure for me in this regard was John Zorn. When I was younger I was a bit of a snob about a lot of types of music and Zorn really disabused me of that in a big way. That's what he's all about—all genres of music are equal. That was quite a revelation to me. Maybe it doesn't seem as profound to me now as it did five or six years ago even, because I feel music has become so mushed as far as genres are concerned, the collision of information that has really escalated, but six years ago this was a profound revelation for me. There's an amazing John Zorn record called *O'o*. Right before that album came out, I heard all those 20-second previews of the tracks they put up on Amazon, and I could not stop thinking of it for the next four days. It was very upbeat exotica music, I would have always called that cheesy before. I kept it in my mind and fetishized it and it became this object to me. I could not wait to get to listen to this record.

The thing I locked in right away with Zorn was his intensity and passion and just how powerful that was. He's all in, and that really hit me. Also with Zorn it's about getting really deep to the roots, not just the surface. It's *beyond* what it sounds like. Music is about people, it's not about sound. It's about finding the humanity within these genres or pieces or whatever you want to call them. It's about finding the humanity in the digital world. That is what I took from Zorn when I started working with the computer in my music. I was very inspired by these ideas of his and wanted to take them into the song format, but wrap it in a candy wrapper a little bit. I wanted it to be linear like the tracking shot, but I also wanted it to be very circular, so that things come back, things repeat. I think the first song on that EP ("Railroad Song") is most like that, where you get one element, then another one, then two of them together, and then a new one, but it's referencing an older one.

Rail: Let's go back to that word "psychedelic" that you used, in the spirit of *Migration to the Interior* at Red Bull Studios, where you'll be performing—could you talk a little about that? Because of course psychedelic music is a particular thing.

Epstein: It is if you think about it as a genre, but I don't really think about it that way. Nor do I think about it in terms of drugs, necessarily. I think about it more like opening a crack in your mind, pulling back the curtains, seeing something as it is, and for everything that it is. Breaking down the hierarchies in seeing and making a hole in your normal ways of perceiving. If you think about it like that, it's interesting what these electronic sounds can do. The same with those jumps in the music, they can alter your perceptions for a moment, and you are forced to take a step back and you're able to just see things for what they are.

I feel like there's an interesting thing happening now in reference to the birth of psychedelic music. I've been listening to the new *Basement Tapes* that just came out. A lot of that music was a reaction to the psychedelic music of the time. The Beatles made *Sgt. Pepper's* and the Rolling Stones made that weird album where they're wearing the hats and stuff [*Their Satanic Majesties Request*], and Bob and the Band said, "This is all bullshit, we need to get

back to the heart of the music." They were making music which is much more basic, and cuts right to the core of the emotions. It's interesting that those two things were kind of juxtaposed at that time. What I try to do is a merging of those two things. So if the psychedelic music can open the crack in your mind, I want to fill it with that other emotional stuff.

Rail: I saw an interview where you mentioned that you hadn't really been paying attention to the words when you were listening to Dylan, or you weren't quite interested in the words at first.

Epstein: I have an abstract relationship to certain things, and I'm constantly becoming more conscious of what some people might consider more obvious. When I was first starting to listen to Dylan, it honestly didn't occur to me to listen to the lyrics, weird as that may seem. I don't know why, it just didn't. There were sounds, and I liked the sounds, and I liked repeating the sounds, but it just didn't occur to me to focus on the lyrics, I don't know how else to put it. I wasn't seeing it as separate parts. I was just feeling it as, like, an orb. That's still how my relationship to the music is. Well, now I break things down for my own purposes more, to try to understand what's going on, so that I can steal from it or learn from it.

Rail: There's the famous David Byrne quote, something along the lines of, "Words are something that makes people listen to music more than they usually would."

Epstein: I wonder what that means.

Rail: I think the meaning is that if you're not particularly attuned to music, words are the thing that's immediately understandable.

Epstein: Right, totally, I think I just had the opposite response with Dylan. I really dug the music, you know? And let me just say, now I am completely nuts about the lyrics, too.

Rail: What interests me is the way Dylan structures a lot of his songs, especially when you get into a lot of the later career stuff when he's just comfortable with a 10-minute blues song —or even on early songs like "Desolation Row" where there's not even a chorus, it's just one thing after another, and the lyrics are there to offer the only sort of mild variation. It's about repetition, you almost get into stretches where you could make an analogy to something like ambient music. And when you mention a larger glowing orb about Bob Dylan, that's what I think of, these songs that are just these endless things.

Epstein: They're powerful, they're like incantations. He's really summoning up a certain primal force or energy. You can feel how important it is for him, too. These things were incantations for him where he was able to summon these feelings and these emotions and this world, and you can feel that without knowing the spells that he's saying. My favorite Dylan song before I started listening to the words was "Idiot Wind," the acoustic version, and still, now that I know all the words very well, it's still my favorite, and for new reasons, and that's weird. I remember as a kid when my parents first moved to Woodstock, the two sounds in my head were "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," and Eminem. Those are the two things I was listening to really intensively.

Rail: I'm not going to try to make a connection between those two things.

Epstein: They were different sides of me, maybe. Eminem was more of the Rolling Stones side of me. I just liked all the screaming [*laughs*].

Rail: What was it about "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"?

Epstein: Well, that's a rap song. There's such a deep vibe there. It enveloped me. The slow crescendo which you don't notice, and by the end of the song you're in a totally other place. It's a very enveloping song, I just remember it really taking care of me. It's very warm, like a blanket.

I can draw the lines between all the music that I like in a very clear way. Going from Coltrane to Dylan to John Zorn is very clear to me. It's the same intensity. And the way Bob approaches playing his songs, he does so in a very jazz-like way, he interprets them new every time he plays. He doesn't like to be in the studio in the same way that jazz musicians don't labor over the record they're making: they show up in the studio and then record in three days, or two days, or whatever, and Bob does the same thing.

Rail: But is it intimidating to engage him as an artist? Do you feel like he's murder as an influence, or do you try to put a distance between his music and yours?

Epstein: I don't feel like he's murder as an influence. I guess because he's been with me for so long. When I sit down to write songs, for whatever reason, I don't try to write Bob's songs. That has never happened to me. Also, I do care a lot about things that he doesn't care anything about, like samples and loops, electronica, ambient music. I think that sound can tell the stories. My ideal is the words telling the story and the sound supporting it or being perpendicular to it—the production being as important as the song is the ideal in music for me. I like it when you're being told the story from these different angles and in an equally effective and intense way.

Rail: Getting back to this idea of the lyrics' role—a lot of bands come out and say they make an effort to either bury the lyrics in the mix or not give weight to the singing over any aspect of the music. Animal Collective are particularly insistent about this, after *Strawberry Jam* and before *Merriweather Post Pavilion* I remember reading an interview with them where they were saying that they'd prefer the voice to be buried, to have it be part of the mix and part of the texture, and if that results in people not necessarily getting all the lyrics or misinterpreting the lyrics, that's all for the better because it's relinquishing control of the song.

Epstein: Right now I'm very deep in working on my full-length record and the lyrics are much more important to me now than they were before. On my first EP I improvised a lot of the lyrics, and it was all kind of "whatever" to me. Now I've become a little more obsessive about it—a lot more obsessive about it actually.

Rail: What is your songwriting process?

Epstein: It's hard for me to talk about my process because it's happening now. On the new record I've had to figure out a lot—I guess it's another rebirth thing that I'm going through. I

made those earlier songs on the computer, it was fluid, I didn't overthink anything too much. I had this sound I wanted to get to and I tried my best to get to it and I think I did. But this new one, when you write songs it's something you struggle with. What do I do with this? It raises all these questions of the current culture and what's new, how important is it to be new? A song sounding great with just you playing it, is that enough? That's one question. There's so many different ways to do it. And you don't want to get in the way of the song. There's a danger of overworking it, getting away from the original vibe, you lose your connection to the song. It's terrifyingly awful.

Right now I'm trying to write a little more traditionally and trying to write some choruses and stuff—it's kind of funny talking about it in those terms. I hate when people talk about hooks, I hate the word hooks, to me it is so demeaning to the music, it's such a horrible term. It's a commodification of what can be a beautiful melody that sticks with you and enters you like metal that pierces your skin. "Now we have to write the hook"—it drives me nuts, I hate that.

Rail: Well, it's like a manipulative, record exec. term.

Epstein: Yeah, but musicians use it too, a lot of musicians use it and I don't like it. Music is the holiest thing in the world to me, it's a powerful thing, and everything gets commodified very quickly and easily so—

Rail: But at the same time, you were saying earlier how you want there to be something for the listener, to give the listener a foothold in the song.

Epstein: Yeah, well thinking about the listener—and that's another thing that took me a little while to understand—I think it's extremely important to think about the listener, because everything is about communication, communication is the most important thing. I don't want to alienate; I want to communicate to as many people as I possibly can by being who I am. And maybe that is limited by who I am—and who I am is always changing anyway. I used to be more of an asshole about it, like a fucking free jazz punk in whatever I was doing—not that there's anything wrong with that—but I definitely had a time in my life where saying "fuck you" was more important to me. And still it's important to say "fuck you" sometimes, because some people need to be told.

Rail: Or some people, if they aren't told, they don't want to listen to you.

Epstein: But I think it's extremely important to think about the listener and think about communicating. I guess what really opened me up to that sort of thing was that I was a huge Kurt Vonnegut fan around the time when I was getting into Coltrane and Dylan. I read all of his books, and then a couple years ago I re-read all of them. He is such an expert communicator. There's just no bullshit, every sentence means something and affects you in a very deliberate way, it's like a chessboard or something, where everything is extremely decisive but also very affecting and beautiful. I was blown away by that. Everything is very, just, *there*—

Rail: He doesn't speak in abstractions.

Epstein: He doesn't, and he wrote a book about it, *Bluebeard*, which I think is one of his best books. It's about a kind of failed, phony Abstract Expressionist painter who's done what he considers to be bullshit stuff, and he had one masterpiece in his barn—I don't want to ruin the book—this one masterpiece that was just this extremely detailed, beautiful, very realistic scene. The message of the book is a little bit complicated, because I can't quite tell how deriding of general Abstract Expressionist painting he is. But the message of the book was definitely communication—I guess it's something I'm still working towards, no bullshit: every sound, every word, every melody, everything should matter, and that's it. I do want to be clear, but I don't think being clear means that you can't be weird or you can't be psychedelic, or you can't be abstract—it's just that everything should be done for a reason, that's all.

Rail: Switching topics slightly, when you've played live on your own of late, you've performed exclusively solo, correct?

Epstein: No—I was on tour with Darkside earlier this year for a few months, those were the first High Water shows I played, and that was alone, but I play with other people whenever I can because I much prefer it.

Rail: And this upcoming album—

Epstein: Has other people on it. And the last record too, the EP, I worked with my friend Noah Rose on a lot of the production stuff. He did a bunch of the electronics, some of the percussion stuff. Nico's going to be helping me produce the new album, he's very organized, and that helps me organize my thinking about it. I'm hoping to work relatively quickly on it now. I've gone through a lot of different ways and feelings with it.

Rail: I want to touch on something you said earlier about music being about people, not about sound, and about finding the humanity in genres: I think the big thing that's lost in electronic music is the notion of individual expression as manifested in tone. For example, you can listen to a Miles Davis record you have never heard, and as soon as you hear the trumpet play, you know it's Miles Davis, because you know how he sounds.

Epstein: The personality, yeah. I feel like an older example of that is John Cage, where despite everything that he did to combat himself, every John Cage piece is so utterly a John Cage piece. So if the artistry is strong enough, the personality comes through—but that's one of the things that's lost, I agree. Or it's just easier not to hear it, I guess. But Nico works in the realm of electronic music, and I think any time you put on something of his it has the same feeling of tone—you know it's him. He uses sound to express himself in a way that I don't think anybody else in the electronic music scene does—he's able to use sound in the same way that some people use words to express themselves. So I agree, a lot of stuff can sound like anybody made it, because of the new forms, but I also think if you're good enough, it's going to sound like you.

Rail: Do you consider the music you make electronic music?

Epstein: I would call the earlier stuff electronic music because I made it on the computer, I wrote the songs using the computer.. As for the new album, I'm still a little unsure what it's going to sound like. It's been a challenge working on this, because I've been dealing with the

question of production a lot, and because these are all songs that I just wrote: I didn't create them on the computer. I've had to answer a lot of questions about what I want to be saying and how I want to be saying it. I don't think it's going to be called electronic music because it's very clearly going to be songs and me singing and playing keyboard, but I do want to explore this territory where I'm able to utilize the things that electronic music does so well, which is to tell stories with sound. I guess I do want to be some kind of future electronic musician, in some sense. There is a kind of loop obsession in music these days, or recently, or since it started—it started in hip-hop, really, 30 years ago. The electronic music that I am most inspired by comes from hip-hop.

Rail: For example?

Epstein: Hip-hop production in general, like J Dilla, Kanye West, Q-Tip, all these people, and that is definitely loop-based kind of stuff. It was the production that really grabbed me in hip-hop, especially with Kanye—just these beautiful objects he's created. Kanye is one of the great geniuses of our time. And now how he's into fashion designing, and his music is very related to fashion, and that's a positive thing, that's not a slight at all. He also is very much like Zorn, bringing in different elements like orchestral strings over hardcore rap with an industrial beat underneath. He's into this mapping of things and gluing things together. He's also similar to Zorn in terms of having community and working with community and that being a really important part of building the music. I feel like that's what can sustain you as an artist.

Rail: With regard to this idea of gluing things together, think of how much art in our world is so determined by Warhol and that simple repetition of a mechanical silkscreen. I think there's also this thing in art, starting with appropriation, where artists felt like there was already enough stuff in the world, why make new things, why can't you just recombine?

Epstein: I think that's probably true, and I guess people have always been doing that anyway, the computer just makes it easier, and more at the forefront, which is kind of weird too, like the subconscious thing coming to the more obvious, physical realm.

Rail: With more and more music being made on computers something that really has struck me is the un-compelling aspect of going to see a show and seeing the musician up on stage with just a laptop in front of him. He's making wonderful sounds, but the visual component of the show is that you're just watching this guy look at a screen. It can be deeply alienating.

Epstein: Right, but also, you have that thing in your kitchen. It's like what we were saying about video games. These are the things being made now, and there's something beautiful in everything. New creations, new forms of beauty, too. I think that's important—that the beauty *does* look different than it used to, which is difficult because it's not the same thing. Keeping yourself open to these things is a big challenge. And there's always the challenge of not falling back into nostalgia. Neil Young is very interesting in this regard. Neil engages with technology in a very interactive way, and also brings the analogue thing with him, which is beautiful, and very special. It's amazing that he did that tour in the '80s with the robots and computers, and that video with Devo, crazy guitar solos over this very robotic music, it's so far out. He's a very physical embodiment of what we are talking about, bringing the human element into these new realms. I personally have been very into singer-songwriter kinds of things lately. It's different from what I was trying to do on the EP. None

of those were songs that I really wrote—I wrote parts and then they just kind of came together. But this new album is pretty much all stuff that I wrote on the piano. My music has definitely become more about just the singing and playing.

Will Epstein's Recommended Listening

Charles Mingus Presents
Charles Mingus (1960)

John Coltrane:
Live at the Village Vanguard, Disc 4 (1961)

Cannonball Adderley:
Radio Nights (1968)

Rahsaan Roland Kirk:
Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata (1971)

Neil Young:
On The Beach (1974)

Michael Hurley:
Wolfways (1995)

Bob Dylan: Live in Prague,
March 12 & 13, 1995 (bootleg)

Bill Frisell:
Blues Dream (2001)

Lucinda Williams:
Essence (2001)

John Zorn:
At The Mountains of Madness (2005)

Bob Dylan:
Tell Tale Signs (2008)

Mike Patton:
Mondo Cane (2010)

Avey Tare:
Down There (2010)

Jeremiah Jae & Oliver the 2nd:
RawHyde (2013)

Bladerunner is:

Will Epstein
Dave Harrington
Tlacael Esparza
Nicolas Jaar
John Stanesco

The Dave Harrington Group is:

Dave
Tlacael
Samer Ghadry
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