



“I’m Looking for a More Psychedelic Directness”: An Interview with High Water

Will Schube and Will Epstein talk about loving Kanye West, making music with friends, and underlying qualities in heroes.

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Will Epstein grew up playing improvisational music as a saxophonist but his High Water project is by no means interested in avant experimentations. His debut full-length, *Crush* is a brilliant mix of pop constructions with abstract colorings courtesy of expressive drums and playful guitar. The album has been released through Nicolas Jaar's Other People label, and Epstein's continuing relationship with Jaar and fellow Other People cohort Dave Harrington has resulted in a debut album equal parts assured and forward-looking.

Crush's nine tracks cover various terrain, from off kilter doo-wop ("Moonlight Mind") to a breathtaking Lucinda Williams cover ("Changed the Locks"). The album's cohesiveness centers around a perfectly crisp Rhodes piano, from which Epstein builds outwards and up, creating compositions both dense and immediately relatable. I spoke with Epstein over the phone just before the release of his debut full-length, and as such the interview questions may touch on events that have already occurred. *Crush* is the perfect summertime album for sweaty nights on back porches. It's haunting, playful, and deeply emotional. —Will Schube

Where are you right now?

High Water: I'm in upstate New York. I'm at my parents' house in Woodstock.

Are you getting ready to tour?

High Water: I'm actually in the midst of a few different things. I'm doing these little tours with the Dave Harrington Group.

Are you in his band?

High Water: Yeah I'm in the band. I play in Dave's band and he plays in my band. It's a good trade off. We were just in Europe and we're going back in a few weeks. I'm planning a couple release shows for my album as well. Just dealing with all that nonsense.

What's your live band like these days?

High Water: It's taken on a few different vibes. The first High Water shows were opening up for Darkside a couple years ago. That was just me and I was kind of using all my hands and feet to make things happen. I was running drums off of my computer that I was cueing with my feet. I had two keyboards...It was kind of a lot [laughs].

I was just starting to work out these songs that are on the album. It was a lot. I don't particularly enjoy having so many...I like being in control, but it can be too much. I just need to be a little freer. Any time I've had to hit a button and cue something, I just don't really like it. I grew up as an improviser so that's much more natural to me.

The last bunch of shows I did in New York I did with Dave [Harrington] and a bass player and a drummer. I was just playing keyboards and saxophones, singing too. I feel a lot more comfortable with that.

You and Nico Jaar grew up together but that doesn't necessarily mean he's just going to sign you to his record label. How did your musical relationship come about?

High Water: Well, it sort of does mean that [laughs]. Nico has been one of my best friends' since I was eight and we started playing music together. We had a couple of weird bands in high school and ended up going to college together. Dave and I played in his band for a while and he's just one of my closest friends and collaborators. He was kind enough to put out my stuff and stand behind it.

Art is always a lot more fun when you're creating it with people you care about.

High Water: Yeah it is. Absolutely. When you care about the person you put more into it. Music is a really intimate thing.

What was opening for Darkside like? What'd you learn by watching them perform every night?

High Water: They basically dragged me out with them [laughs]. I was just kind of silly looking. I was pretty reticent to be performing by myself. I was just kind of scared. But it ended up being really special. I'm somebody that needs to be dragged out of himself. But that tour got me going and got me writing and forced me to engage with the material I had been working on. I was writing the new record on stage every night. I was working it out.

The tour was a nice evolution for all of us. We were all doing our thing, which was really important. Instead of Dave and I just playing Nico's music or whatever, we were all together traveling doing our own stuff. Certainly it was intense every night, but it was special.

What's changed from your first EP to this debut LP regarding your songwriting and performances?

High Water: Quite a lot I would say. My initial objective with this stuff was to write songs with craft. I wanted the lyrics to really mean something to me. I wrote all the songs on my keyboard which was very different for me. Earlier songs were written more as a blob of creation. This time around, I had all the stuff written before I went in to production.

I labored over these songs. They took a really long time to get them happening, plus I was sort of learning how to write songs while I was doing it. I was really driven by something I can't really name, but it was definitely something I needed to get out. It was quite an intense process.

I'm kind of obsessed with demo type recordings. I just love the rawness of that energy. You don't want to lose the vital energy of a song when you put it on a record. When you've played it a billion times trying to finish it, you can lose sight of the original thing. So it was a real challenge. Nico was really helpful in that regard, and he ended up producing the album with me.

What was working with Dave Harrington like for your album?

High Water: It was really easy. I would go over to his house—I went over there about three or four times—and we would work on one or two songs at a time. He's on five or six of the tracks on the album. I would have some prompt to give him and we would just kind of go and lay down a bunch of different ideas and see what would work.

We've been playing together for a long time and we have this very effortless sort of thing together. He knows what stuff I like and I know what stuff he likes. We speak the same language.

Working with Nico was also pretty essential because I was just getting so deep in my head about how to produce these songs.

There is a real pervasive aesthetic that runs through the album from song to song. Is that something you had in mind while writing and recording?

High Water: How would you describe that aesthetic?

It's weird because the press releases and stuff talk about you as this avant-jazz dude, but the album sounds like a really good experimental pop record. The whole thing feels built around the Rhodes keyboard in a way.

High Water: You can hear the baseline thing that runs through the entire album, which is me on the keyboard making these songs. The songs are all sort of—they all have a similar quality to them. They're all stripped down to their bones. They're all very circular. I sort of thought of them as incantations. The looseness of it—it's definitely not a jazz record by any means. I wanted it to have a certain openness to it, though. And I think the circular aspect of it allows for their to be this rotating base line thing. It's like a lawnmower or something—it's this thing that's always moving forward that you can tweak and mutate.

It reminds me a bit of what Dave Harrington did with his record. Recording people and cutting and pasting in post-production. That's not exactly what you did but it's similar in concept.

High Water: Yeah. It's nice to be able to color between the lines. Setting something up for yourself and then sticking to it.

What sort of music were you listening to while writing and recording?

High Water: I cover a Lucinda Williams song on the record and she's a huge influence on me. She's awesome and she's one of my biggest heroes. I think her type of lyric writing was very inspiring to me. I didn't necessarily do the same thing she does, but she's able to communicate with the most sublime kind of directness. She says these super simple lines that magnify something cosmic. That kind of aesthetic hits me super hard. It's like a bullet that enters you and then shatters into a million pieces. That aesthetic—even beyond lyric writing—is something I try to do.

I want each word, each line, each sound that comes in to be really meaningful and when something really meaningful is proposed at the right angle in the right way it can feel huge. Every word is essential in her songs. That whole aesthetic I really relate to—it's very moving to me too. She's also super intense. Most of the music I really love is super intense.

In high school I listened to only John Coltrane for three years. That's like another level of intensity [laughs]. The things that I was looking for while making this record was to be as direct and relatable as possible. I know that the songs have a lot of—well they're not direct like a pop song, but I'm looking for a more psychedelic directness that can kind of just sneak inside of you.

The Lucinda Williams cover comes out of nowhere but it fits so perfectly. Why did you decide to take on "Changed the Locks?" And your two versions are very different. Hers is affirming and powerful and yours is almost heartbreaking. Why did you decide to spin your version this way?

High Water: I don't necessarily hear her version the way I performed it. I think that the moment I started singing that's just the way it came out. It's just the way I felt the song. It was just sadder. The way those words made me feel were filled with more regret and sadness. But I find that it's complicated. It isn't not empowering to me, the way I perform that song. It does feel empowering to me to say those words.

One of the reasons I relate to that song is because the essence of it spreads itself out to every other song on my album. It's really a feeling of trying to create emotional space. It's a push and pull with the outside world. I need to fortify and take care of myself. That first song, "Moonlight Mind" is sort of a lullaby to myself. It's like learning how to take care of yourself. That's what a lot of the songs are about. It's a push and pull thing.

For me to sing about 'changing the locks on my front door' is empowering but there's a sadness to it too that I haven't totally unpacked either. I haven't totally articulated it to myself in words.

Lyrical, a lot of it is poetic and figurative, but a song like "Seattle" is heavily based around a narrative. How do you sort between these two very different songwriting styles?

High Water: They're definitely different modes of thinking. I think that something like "Moonlight Mind" comes from a subconscious sort of place. And sometimes you don't really know how meaningful it is until you really take some time and a few steps back from it. That happens to me with a lot of the songs. I was just learning how to do it and a lot of these phrases would come to me subconsciously and I didn't think much of them. But then I had to sit with it for a while and it became a lot more meaningful to me. It made me feel a bunch of things [laughs].

A song like "Seattle" is more fun to write. For whatever reason that song was very easy to write words on top of those chords. I have pages and pages of lyrics for that song. It was more about shaping it and stripping it down. It was exciting to me just to write a song with a more classical kind of narrative. It was exciting to feel like I could do that because I didn't think that I could.

Who are some of your musical heroes? I know you're a big John Zorn fan.

High Water: Zorn is absolutely one of my huge, huge heroes. I really responded to his confidence in what he was doing and his punk rock attitude. He's one of the few musicians I listen to that's not primarily about emotions. There's something else. A lot of his music feels like a camera on a dolly moving slowly through a bunch of different scenes. His music is very image related. It works in a visual way. A lot of his songs go to five or six different worlds and I've been very influenced by that. It's a sort of jump cut aesthetic. It's just something I like. It's extremely psychedelic music but he'd never talk about it in those terms.

If you see him live, you know nothing really rivals it. The way he conducts musicians is very controlled but allows for a lot of improvisation. When I play, I'm thinking about him a ton. Coltrane's another big one, Dylan too. He's probably my favorite musician.

What's your favorite Dylan record?

High Water: My favorite Bob record is probably Blood on the Tracks. But with him there are always these caveats. It's like, "I dig the acoustic version recorded six months earlier in New York," you know? All these guys work in very different styles but I look for the same thing in everybody. It's the same two or three reasons. It's all one thing to me.

The reasons I like Coltrane and Bob are pretty similar. It's all about deeply felt intensity and emotions. I think Coltrane really influenced my singing. I try to see the keys of my saxophone while singing. Coltrane knew how to get across a certain kind of longing and melancholy that was really beautiful—but not just sad. It was deeply complicated and deeply spiritual and that's what I look for in things that I like. I'm also a huge Kanye fan. I love him.

That's so good to hear. I can't stand people that dismiss his music because they think he's an asshole.

High Water: It's very frustrating for us Kanye fans. Most fights I've gotten into have been about Kanye [laughs]. He's actually pretty similar to Zorn to me in the way they think about visuals.

You have a reprise on the new album to "Railroad Song" which was on your first EP. Do you view your work as a cohesive whole or do you use each new record to establish a new sonic identity?

High Water: I would hope so. I'm explicitly trying to make each thing very different—that's very important to me. But I do hope there's a certain High Water-ness to my work. I hope there's something pervasive that lasts.